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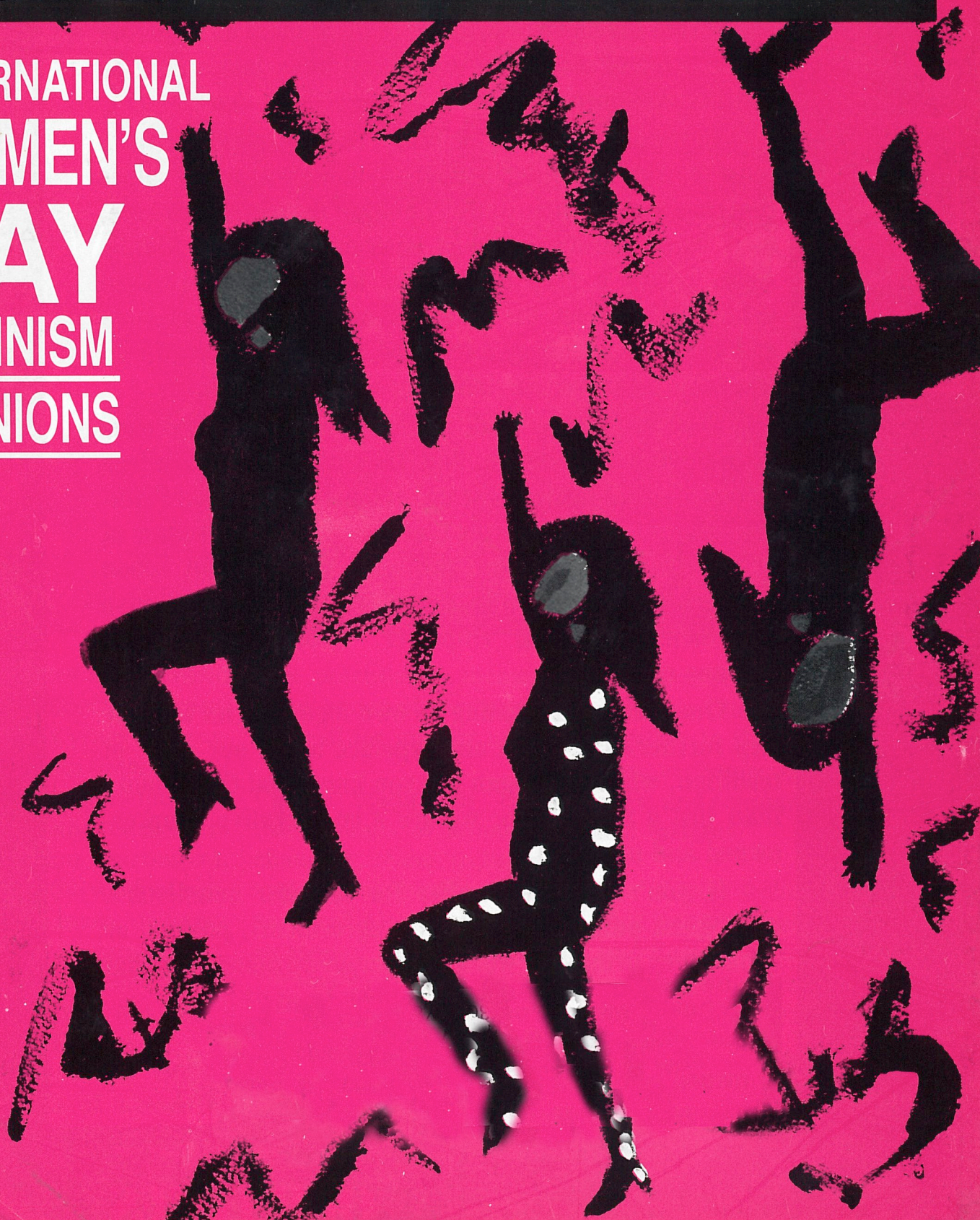
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# OUR TIMES

INTERNATIONAL  
WOMEN'S  
**DAY**  
FEMINISM  

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IN UNIONS



# Fighting racism and sexism together

**W**omen's groups in Toronto are drawing links between racism and sexism, and see them as twin obstacles to organizing and unity. The March 8th Coalition, composed of dozens of unions, social agencies, and community groups, has issued its statement for International Women's Day. It says, in part: "We do not believe that racism is merely a misunderstanding among people, a question of interpersonal relations, or an unchanging part of human nature. It is, like sexism, an integral part of the political and economic system under which we live. This system uses racism and sexism to divide us and to exploit our labour for super-profits and it gives some of us privilege. We must fight this in our daily lives. We cannot just educate racism away, and even legal reforms are not enough. We must change the economic and political structures which maintain the oppressions we face."

*Our Times Collective*

# *Making it work takes a*

**W**omen have made important gains in unions. Issues like equal pay for work of equal value, and recourse against sexual harassment, now sit on union agendas. Affirmative action campaigns continue to put women into leadership positions. This is, however, only a crucial first step in winning equality for women workers.

Because the labour movement in Canada, although growing, still represents less than half of the work force and it faces formidable obstacles. Restrictive labour legislation, concession demands, deregulation and contracting-out are all casting big shadows on workers who have managed to organize. Meanwhile the structure of the economy is tilting away from the more heavily unionized goods-producing sectors, like mining and manufacturing, where most workers are men. And the new jobs are opening up in the service sector — where there is likely to be no union, a lot of women workers and a lot of part-timers. ▶

***By Miriam Edelson***

***Illustrations by  
Donna Kagan***



*little longer*



# People argue about mothering, being single, relations with men, dress codes and flirting.

All of these factors have hit labour hard and today many unions remain inward-looking, defensive, and institutionally conservative. They tend to reproduce traditional patterns of male dominance while simply servicing the needs of the minority organized.

What is the next step? What are we going to do? How will women unionists use the influence and base they are developing? How will they exercise leadership? Does our vision of unionism challenge the bureaucratic climate of unions in which we are active? How will unions organize themselves in the future?

I'd like to tell you how women unionists in the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) are creating alternative models for union work using the lessons of "feminist process." They share, with trade unionists in other labour organizations, the same preoccupation with women's issues.

PSAC represents 180,000 federal public servants and it's the fifth largest union in the country. Last December they elected a militant language teacher from St. Jean, Quebec, to their five-member full time executive. Joane Hurens joins second vice president Susan Giampietri, a veteran union feminist who has laboured alone at that level for two years.

Hurens' election has greater significance than simply plumping the female contingent at the executive level. It also reflects the degree to which women are entering and re-shaping the corridors of union power.

Those PSAC feminists gladdened by Huren's election, and who identify with feminist process, base their work on two deeply-seated tenets. First, personal and political issues are inseparable. Second, the ends do not always justify the means — the goals of our union work must always be kept in mind while we are working toward our objectives.

This means that we are interested in how we work together, and not just what we are working on. We pay attention to how we relate to each other, and not just what we're fighting for.

We pay attention, for example, to how a negotiating team divides responsibility for speaking at the bargaining table. During an organizing drive, we ask questions about the role of the organizing committee. The degree to which members are involved in decision-making, and encouraged to debate issues openly — not just the number of cards signed — would be a measure of the drive's success.

Certainly, many trade union militants have argued for this approach for years. What's new is the emphasis we place on personal issues, considering them political, and treating people's feelings as important.

The feminist process of union democracy was first developed in PSAC in our program on women's issues. Three years ago, PSAC pioneered a six-day in-residence course — "Women at Work" — exclusively for women members. We explore the sources of women's oppression in society and in the workplace and talk about issues like equal pay, sexual harassment and affirmative action. We try to figure out the reasons some women are not involved in the union and we try to develop some workable solutions to these problems.

Conflict between participants emerges since many choose different lifestyles and priorities. People argue about mothering, on being single, on relations with men at work, on appropriate dress codes, flirting, and the importance of men or women in our 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 one is attacked on personal grounds. A variety of views are possible, and women are encouraged to voice their differences without putting someone else's choice down.

This can be difficult since the issues raised are often emotional.

For example, women whose families form their central daily concern may feel threatened or angry when women, who are more work oriented, express open criticisms of the men in their lives. And single

women, or lesbians, may feel discounted or angry if people exclusively refer to heterosexual relationships and marriage.

The clashing of these personal identities forces reflection, self-examination and exchange — all part of the challenge to participants' attitudes.

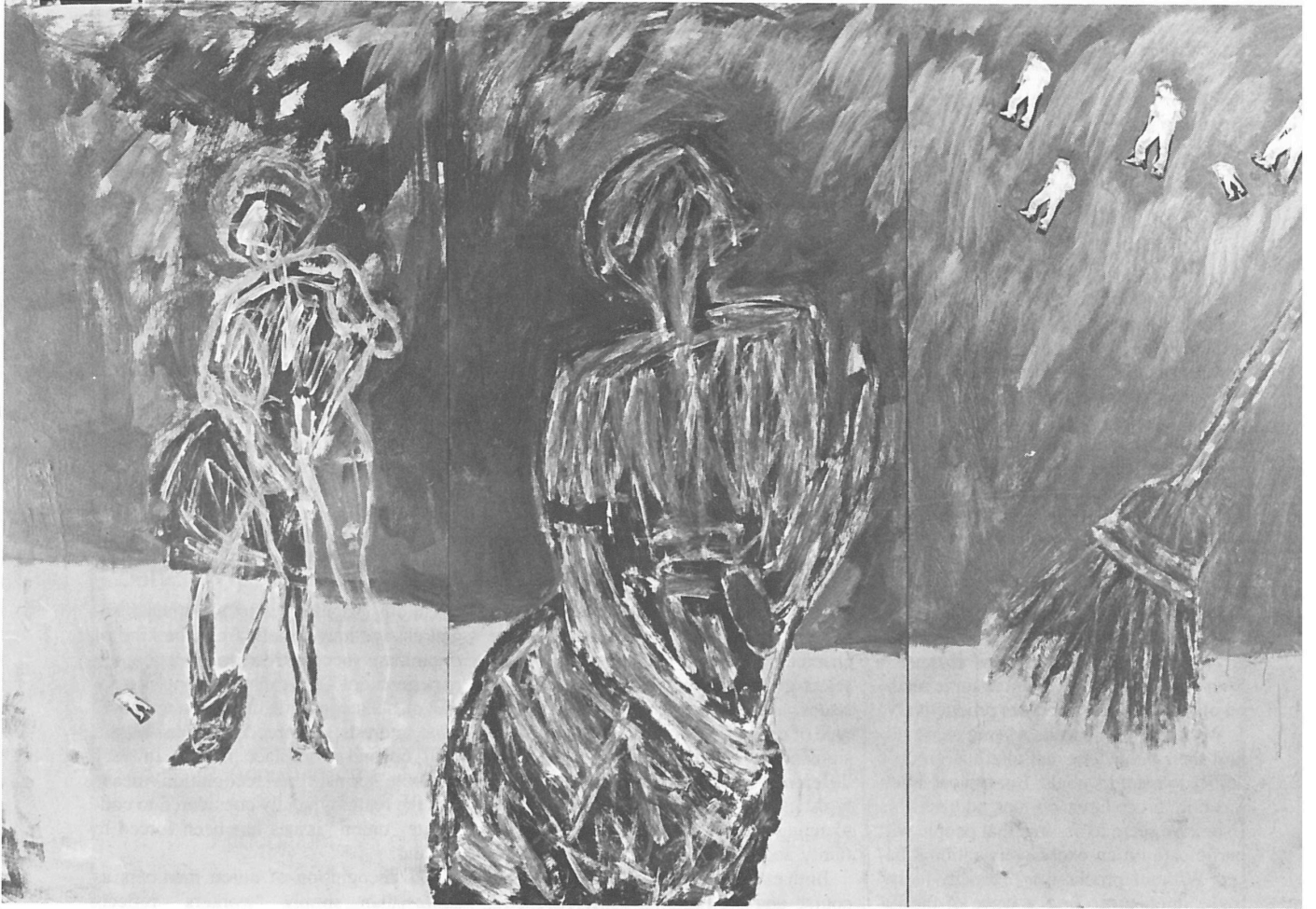
Positive resolution of conflicts like these seldom occurs by itself. Group facilitators try to create an atmosphere where these things can be worked out.

During the introductory session, participants are asked to briefly talk about one accomplishment they feel especially good about. There's only one requirement — they have to speak positively about themselves. Many find this exercise difficult since they are prevented from putting themselves down — all too familiar to many women. Sharing personal experiences, they are encouraged to take risks in a new group. As each woman takes her turn, people express their support. Immediately, they are able to relate on a more intimate level, and first impressions and stereotypes are partially eroded. A climate of trust is developed.

Everyone is also given the chance — no, encouraged — to "check in" with one another at the beginning of each day's session. They are asked to express their feelings about the course and the group, and to talk about problems they may have, either personal problems or difficulties with the program itself. Because members of the group are encouraged to deal directly with one another and not to rely upon the facilitator, tensions which inevitably develop tend to be dealt with by the group.

Two things are significant about working this way. First, we acknowledge the importance of feelings in our reactions and behaviour. We know that we have to deal with people's rational and emotional sides. Because so many of the problems women face are grounded in discriminatory attitudes, this integrated perspective is crucial.

Second, the learning which takes place as the group chooses how to deal with conflict is integral to the course objectives. Although the classroom is an artificial setting, we are constantly encountering the



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same problems we meet in "real life." As the women explore working collectively, challenging one another, and laughing together, they also learn to value themselves and their sisters more. This is empowering for the individual, while the group support strengthens the women's determination to contest difficult circumstances once back in their workplaces.

Any local executive or negotiating team could use this approach. Groups working together closely need to develop a basis of trust to be effective. While different political views, styles, and historical rivalries cannot be ignored, at some point the group has to decide whether or not it wants to really accomplish its tasks. And if the answer is yes, the group requires some method of talking out differences productively.

We know that people's feelings condition their behaviour and also the group's ability to meet its goals. But typical union meeting procedures do not address this issue. We seem to assume that people will participate on an exclusively rational basis. Without proclaiming "touchy-feely" trade unionism to be 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 more productive debate of issues.

We are not, however, focussing simply on how our sisters feel and how they relate to each other. Women unionists also need to learn organizing and political skills. There is another series of regional women's conferences now underway in PSAC. Called "Getting Organized: Equality in the Workplace and Our Union," the conferences' main aim is for women members to learn the skills necessary to become active in the union and make it more responsive to their needs.

Through a series of workshops, participants learn to prepare resolutions on women's issues for union meetings, to speak in public and to lobby 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 writ-

ten, practising new skills.

Many women also take the chance to caucus together on a geographical or cultural basis to identify common problems. Each caucus establishes a realistic goal and then undertakes to meet to carry it out after the conference. Networking among the women helps them to support each other once they've gone back to their locals and start applying what they learned.

We're building a network of women activists across the country. Members in each region get together in the planning stages of their conference. They take the national agenda and change it to reflect the character and needs of their region. They select guest speakers, they raise regional issues, and organize cultural events. This type of organizing involves a lot of discussion and the development of new skills as different women take responsibility for the logistics and the program. Of course, the planning process is a great learning opportunity and a focus for union energy.

Both examples, the six-day educational course and the regional conferences, reflect the two underlying principles of feminist organizing: that personal issues are political, and that in political work, the objectives must be reflected in the process through which they are achieved.

Leadership along these lines is being offered now by women at all levels of the union movement. The interest, however, in democratizing union practices by decentralizing power to members is not a goal shared by all. Just as resistance to taking women's issues to the bargaining table was and 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, we can no longer afford not to examine the lessons and experiences other movements have to offer.

At a time when fully 50 per cent of the Canadian Labour Congress' inner circle is female, it is crucial that trade unionists not be lulled into believing equality has been achieved. Role models are significant, but

further 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 their organizations. As employers' and governments' attacks on working people continue, it is important that we not lose sight of the reasons which prompted us to look inside our unions in the first place. Our goal is to build strong unions capable of defending women and organizing all workers.

Unionists committed to fundamental social change may benefit from the kind of organizing success their union sisters are 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 means 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. It is this message which shapes the processes and models many union women are experiencing in their work.

And as 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.

*Miriam Edelson lives in Ottawa.*

*Donna Kagan's illustrations are part of a series on working women, recently shown at Weller-Potovsky Gallery. They were painted on plywood and then photographed in black and white for publication. These two are "The Nurse" and "Housewife."*