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OUR TIMES

INDEPENDENT CANADIAN LABOUR MAGAZINE

MARCH 1989 VOL. 8 NO. 2 \$3



Women in the Movement Speak on

Abortion
Tax Reform
Free Trade
Office Work

A Heavy Load at Half the Price

Vancouver Office Workers Speak Out!

Clerical Research Group
Submitted by Jan Nicol

Stand on the corner of Burrard and Pender on a weekday morning. Observe the office workers walking briskly to work — the majority of men to managerial jobs and the majority of women to support staff positions.

Vancouver office workers feel underpaid, over-stressed, and a sizable minority have to obey dress codes in the office.

Those are just a few findings from a unique survey done by The Clerical Research Group, a voluntary organization of unionized office workers.

They mailed 1,000 questionnaires to Vancouver office workers, using addresses from the city directory. Two hundred and twenty workers responded, giving the Group a modest profile of clerical workers' problems, opinions, and hopes.

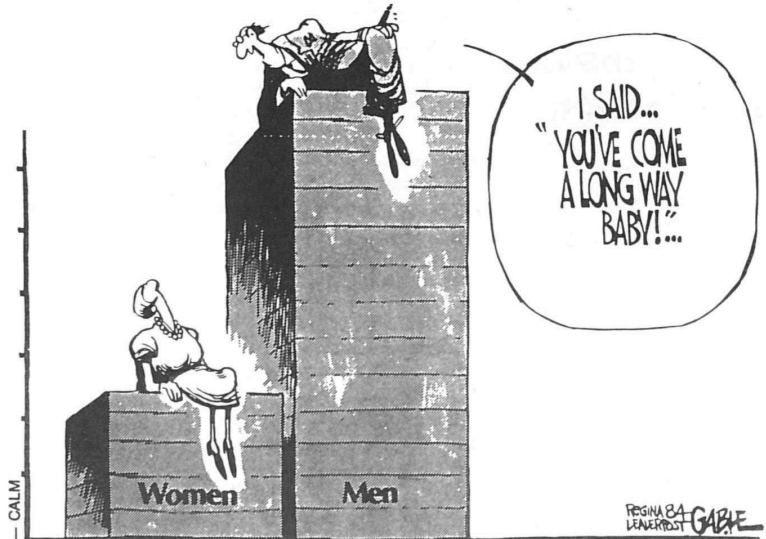
Most of the respondents were women who work full-time for a private sector employer, without union protection.

The survey confirms the common perception that office work is underpaid. But there were some surprises for the researchers as well. For instance, 40 per cent of office workers who use computers said their work was more interesting and enjoyable. (However, most of them also reported health effects like eye strain, headaches, and backaches.)

The researchers also asked workers how they managed to cope with the stress of the office. They found most respondents resort to positive outlets — exercise, reading, hobbies, and family activities. Very few take to drugs or alcohol. But 17 per cent did report "excessive sleeping" as a way of dealing with fatigue.

Many respondents added insightful comments about their working conditions which were included with the statistical results. One respondent asked: "What specifically do these surveys accomplish? Do they really help individuals in the secretarial and clerical fields improve their job situations?"

The researchers respond: "These survey results provide us with a mirror of ourselves. We can examine our reflection and use the information to our mutual benefit.



We carry heavy workloads at half the price. . .and we deserve much more."

After the report was published in October 1988, the researchers have been leafletting downtown office workers with copies of the 10-page report. As the researchers note: "We hope the information in this report provides office workers with evidence that the problems of our working conditions are not individual but the outgrowth of a system which will continue to work against our interests unless we organize to defend ourselves. Also evident from the survey results is that we have the strength and capabilities to cope with difficult conditions."

Office workers speak

On Wages and Respect "I think women should be paid more on level with what men make for the amount of work they do, regardless of who has a family to support and who is single. That is the biggest problem — besides being thought of as second class."

"I feel employees these days are not treated fairly by employers due to the lack of jobs available. There is a definite attitude of 'take it or leave it' by employers which is very unfortunate. . . I am a firm believer in the expression 'what goes around comes around.' It

shows a shortsighted attitude to the future when jobs are more available, and they (the employers) lose good staff."

On Workload and Stress "Clerical staff work harder than management trying to rush a job and answer phones at the same time. They get no perks and are the lowest paid. I'm a receptionist and have all kinds of people to handle and it's hard to keep looking so calm and happy all the time."

On Computers "One area that I find relevant with the technological advances occurring more and more rapidly is that very little emphasis is put on the safety of the worker — i.e. working hours on computers, proper breaks and the ergonomics of the office. These things I find are at the bottom of the list. I also feel that these concerns fall on 'deaf ears' and not a lot is going to be done."

On Promotions "In the bank, men are still definitely favoured when it comes to the higher positions. In my own experience, after 10 years in one phase of banking, I opted to make a change as there was no opportunity to go any further."

The report can be obtained, free of charge, by writing to: The Clerical Research Group, #207 - 1230 Burnaby Street, Vancouver, B.C. V6E 1P5. Or call: Jan Nicol (604) 689-7822.

Women Speak

Free Trade, Coalitions, and the NDP

In the wake of the Tories' majority victory in the recent federal election, and the passage of the Free Trade Agreement (FTA), Our Times staff called several women of the labour movement in different regions of the country.

We asked for their views on the situation now. How do we continue the fight against business-oriented political policies? Should unions continue to work with broadly-based coalitions? What is their reaction to the criticism of the New Democratic Party, particularly to Canadian Auto Workers' president Bob White's letter to the NDP leadership ("Lost Opportunity," Our Times, January 1989)?

Here are some of the comments we received.



Marjorie Cohen

In terms of the trade issue, we will have to keep working on this — not only this, of course, but we will have to keep working on it. We must analyse why we

didn't win. This was a major disappointment for the popular sector and all the normal supporters of the NDP. There are things that we can do little about, but the party wasn't responsive to its supporters and we can do something about that.

In this campaign against free trade, the popular sector came together in a way that it had never done before. We even had feminists working with the Roman Catholic church, for God's sake. And the NDP leadership reacted with suspicion! Incredibly they were not there on the issues. Because they believe they lack credibility on economic issues, they stuck with social issues. But I think they underestimate people's ability to understand economic issues.

People didn't vote for the NDP because nobody had confidence in them. They were not listening to their supporters. They must become much more responsive. The party is controlled by an elite at the top who didn't even listen to their own officers. This free trade issue was the closest thing we have had to a class war, and they weren't there. They wouldn't recognize a revolution if they

had been shot by it.

We also have to do something about the very biased media coverage this issue received. We need to do a systematic analysis of the points of view they're presenting and we need to lodge official complaints.

We will have to really monitor the effects of this deal, not just listing plant closures, but asking what it means to a community to lose this or that service. We will have to keep close tabs on these things, and it will be a lot of work keeping the issues before the public.

I don't see this movement going away at all. The level of activity and unity was truly extraordinary. The different groups and sectors are now less isolated. I think that Mulroney is going to have a real headache with the popular sector on all issues.

Marjorie Cohen is an economist at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education and is active in the National Action Committee on the Status of Women. She co-chairs the Toronto Coalition Against Free Trade.



Barb Byers

As far as we are concerned in Saskatchewan, the fight is not over. We should not just catalogue the problems, but we must push for preventive measures. We have to make sure that Mulroney lives up

to every promise he made and every time he breaks a promise, we have to be there.

It's not that we should go 'round telling people, we told you so — ain't it awful? — we must continue the work. We will work with coalitions, definitely. We're not ever dropping this. Isn't this what social unionism is all about? You can't build something, then drop out, and then support it when it suits you.

The coalitions created a better understanding of the labour movement. The Saskatchewan government is now bringing in changes to the Industrial Standards Act — they want to take away labour standards and the minimum wage. It's mainly going to affect non-union workplaces and it's the deregulation of the workplace. Some community agencies and organizations are now coming to us saying they want us to help them to understand the implications of this. People who are not even organized are coming to the labour movement for leadership.

I suppose [the criticism of the NDP] was right, but here in Saskatchewan, we were on the campaign against free trade for a year. There was no other issue but free trade. People even criticized us for not dealing with other issues, like taxes. And the NDP did extremely well: from nine Conservative seats and 5 NDP, we went to four Tories and 10 NDP.

Barbara Byers, of the Saskatchewan Government Employees Union, is the president of the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour. She lives in Regina.



Gwen Wolfe

The negative atmosphere for workers continues, but under the FTA, it is intensified. The battle isn't any different, there are more barriers to leap over. Coalitions are extremely important. It's an opportunity for labour to learn other sides of the question. There are always some who stick to their own agenda, but we will continue to use coalitions. It depends on who participates in the coalitions. People have to be interested in politics in the broadest sense. Interested in political work and in making it work. How do things get done? Very few people think about that.

I don't know if it's right or wrong, but the vast overwhelming majority of people think that politicians are dirty lying scoundrels. They think politicians should listen to what they say, and then go and do the work of governing. They don't see the importance of being part of the process. Too often they do something, hit a brick wall, and POW, they stop. Learning the long-term process is very important.

[As for White's criticism of the NDP] it's not what happened here as we had just come through a provincial election and in the federal one, most people voted against free trade in Nova Scotia. But I have to tell you that there is nothing there that I disagree with. These are legitimate concerns that need to be addressed.

Gwen Wolfe, of the Nova Scotia Government Employees Union, is the president of the Nova Scotia Federation of Labour. She is in Halifax.



Nancy Riche

[re White's letter] The party's discussed it and I'm co-chairing the party's review committee, and I'm also on the CLC's committee. There's a quite

wide level of agreement with Bob's letter. In fact, we've received a lot of letters.

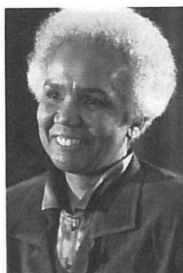
What is the next step? It is to open up the review committee to anyone who wants to speak to this. We must provide opportunities for people to listen to the discussion, to present written briefs, and

to hear from people all over. We must take advantage of Bob White's letter.

I had some concerns with coalitions, particularly around the debate on strategic voting in the Pro Canada Network. Theoretically I support coalitions, but — and the "but" is keeping the entire coalition on the same agenda. Sometimes it was absolutely wild. When strategic voting came up, well, I'll stick with my party even when the situation is tense, but it can be difficult logistically. It doesn't mean don't do it, but they can be very diverse, people bring their own agendas and we're not heading for the same place.

But we have been developing a close working relationship with friends in different areas. The coalition work is still ongoing, and we still sit down together. God knows how long we will be in this free trade mode.

Nancy Riche, of the Newfoundland Association of Public Employees, is an executive vice president of the Canadian Labour Congress. She is in Ottawa.



Rosemary Brown

Keeping up our level of activity is more important than ever given the actions and behaviour of the corporate community. With the loss of jobs we're expecting, we must keep the trade discussion in public. We have to zero in on examples and keep pressure on the government.

I see a few problems in hanging onto the media attention. Most media supported the big decision-makers who went for free trade, so we will have to use trade union and alternative media.

Our battles are far from over. We can't say let's lick our wounds and go home. You have to remember that after Operation Solidarity, this was our second time here in B.C. with coalitions, and we must absolutely continue. Working with many people not only tells what side we are on, but who is there with us. Coalitions must continue on an ongoing basis.

[About the Bob White letter] I didn't see the content of his letter. I'm aware that there were some problems and I think the discussion is extremely healthy. If you don't get in there, do a dissection, then you never grow. Here in B.C. we did better than we have ever done before. Drawing on our experience with Solidarity, the

community and trade union opposition made free trade a central issue. Unlike Ontario, employers couldn't come and intimidate the workers because the workers trusted the trade union when they said the free trade agreement was bad. But then, we've always been smarter in B.C.

Rosemary Brown is a teacher and former New Democratic Party member of the B.C. legislature. She lives in Vancouver.



Linda Torney

The coalition-building has to continue. Any affected group cannot be isolated, because free trade will touch so many areas and have impact on so many people, we must have more people involved.

Hopefully the labour movement's strategy will reflect the need for wide mobilization. In the meantime we must build an excellent monitoring system so we can track the effects of free trade. We have been trying to do this in Metro Toronto with plant shutdowns, but we must also pay attention to health care legislation, daycare, and peace and disarmament.

As for action, well, I'd like to say we need a general strike. We do need innovative ways to bring the problems of free trade to the public's attention.

The effects of free trade will create an atmosphere for organizing, with the erosion of health and safety standards for example, and we have to be in a position to take advantage of that. I think that the labour council's strike support committee will become more important, and not just at strikes, but in shaping public opinion.

[About the election] I don't think the post-mortems are over yet. Ed's done a lot for the party, but there is a sense in the labour movement that we were not there in the room when party strategy was developed.

I think that political action at the municipal level should not be overlooked. In municipal politics, we create a wealth of recognised leadership at an elected level. We bring together longer term coalitions. And we show the public NDP leadership is responsible.

Linda Torney, of the Southern Ontario Newspaper Guild, is the president of the Labour Council of Metropolitan Toronto.



CHOICE

A Year After the Supreme Court

by B. Lee

A year ago the Supreme Court of Canada threw out the abortion law and, for the first time, recognized women's right to what they called "bodily integrity." The old law compelled women to seek the permission of hospital committees of three doctors. Less than half of this country's hospitals even had committees. Under the old law, thousands of women suffered the anxiety and expense of leaving their communities to secure abortion services.

Now in 1989, are we any nearer to our goal of reproductive freedom for women?

There certainly have been some key developments since the Supreme Court ruling. New clinics have opened in Toronto and Vancouver; a clinic in Winnipeg reopened and pro-choice activists in other areas are working to establish additional clinics. Public opinion polls reaffirm that over 70 per cent of the population support freedom of choice. Dozens of major organizations representing millions of Canadians — from the Canadian Labour Congress, to the National Action Committee on the Status of Women — have told the government there must be no new criminal law on abortion.

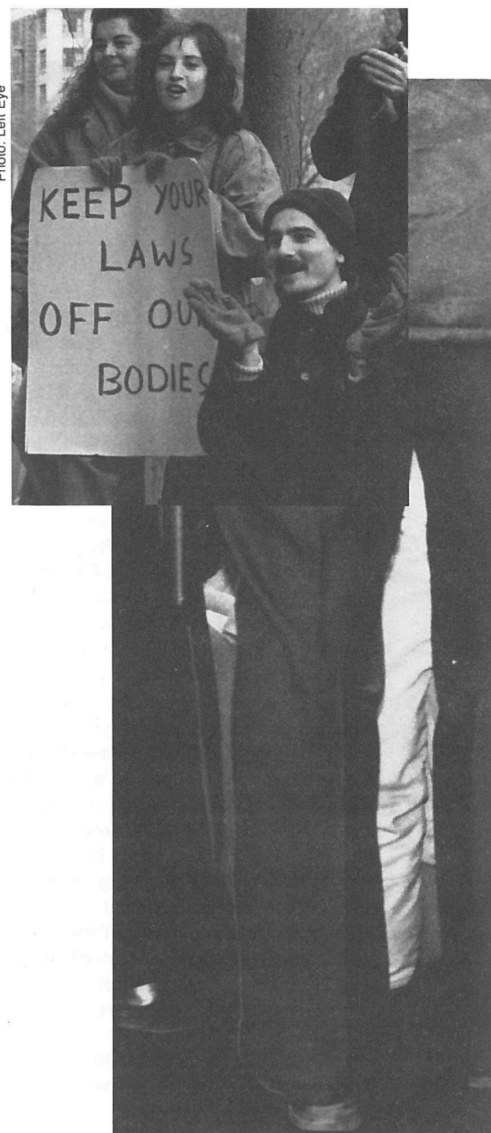
But before the ink was dry on the Court's decision it was clear that even the most dramatic ruling could not guarantee equal access to abortion across the country. Leading the other way as he does on so many issues, Premier Bill Vander

Zalm of British Columbia tried to restrict public funding of abortion to only those cases where the mother's life was in danger. This outrageous attempt to turn the clock back was immediately greeted by an angry pro-choice demonstration of 3,000 and eventually ruled unconstitutional by the provincial supreme court.

Other provinces declared they had no plans to improve access to abortion and would not allow community clinics. Access to abortion remains deplorable in many parts of the country; no abortions are performed in Prince Edward Island.

The federal government has ignored its statutory responsibility to ensure universal and equal access to health care in this area and still threatens to bring back a new criminal law on abortion.

The anti-choice minority has turned to increasingly desperate and violent acts in



its attempt to impose its view on all women by banning abortion entirely.

Getting rid of the oppressive old law was a major victory for the choice movement. The supreme court decision has provided an important opportunity for us to push on to really win free and equal access to abortion and all the other reproductive care women need. But much remains to be done.

No new abortion law

It is certainly clear what must not be done: there must be no new criminal law on abortion. Just before the election the government's ill-conceived resolution on abortion was defeated. Nonetheless, the federal government still insists that there must be criminal legislation on abortion.

Do we need a law to protect women's health? Hardly — all the old law ensured



Photo: Left Eye

was inequitable and inadequate access, poor quality care, and nonexistent or inadequate counselling. Just as for any other health service, quality of care can be guaranteed by sound policy, adequate resources and the promotion of high standards. None of this requires criminal restrictions. If governments were really concerned with women's health, they would establish community-based clinics, long documented to be the best means of providing timely and equal access to high-quality woman-centred abortion and reproductive care.

Won't there be more late abortions without a law? The spectre of irresponsible and feckless women having abortions up to the moment of birth has been seized upon by the more lurid anti-choice commentators, and some commentators have argued for gestational age limits as

the solution. It appears that the government favours legislation that would restrict abortion past a particular gestational age.

It is important to remember that no one chooses late abortion; they are more complicated and traumatic for both the woman and health care practitioners. Even under the old law with its cumbersome system of therapeutic abortion committees, late abortions were thankfully rare. For the last 15 years abortions over 20 weeks gestational age have constituted less than one-half of one per cent

of all abortions, less than 150 per year across the country. But what causes late abortion?

The main reason has been the limited access in so many communities, forcing women into time-consuming and expensive travel, and the hospital quotas and approval committees which cause significant delays. The answer is simple enough: ensure timely and equal access.

A high proportion of late abortions involve young women. The reasons can range from ignorance about sexuality and reproduction, to self-denial of pregnancy, and fear of parental reaction.

What is needed are preventive measures: equal access to comprehensive care and counselling, and changing those circumstances that bring women to the dilemma of late abortions. Restricting abortion past certain arbitrary points will

Photo: Left Eye

only endanger women who face the greatest difficulty obtaining access to abortion: the young woman who was afraid to tell her parent and did not know where to find counselling; women from rural and poorly serviced areas; women whose first language is not English for whom it is so much harder to negotiate the referral system; and women who lose a job, whose partner leaves them or becomes abusive, or who are confronted by other sudden crises that leave them feeling unable to cope with a previously wanted pregnancy. Birth control workers see women in such circumstances every day.

A new criminal law on abortion will do nothing to enhance women's health and well-being. A key task of the reproductive rights movement and the many supporters of choice in the coming months must be to keep the pressure on the federal government to not re-introduce criminal legislation on abortion. For individual women, abortion must be seen as a matter of personal choice and autonomy; for society as a whole, abortion must be seen as an issue of health policy not criminal law.

Public responsibility

If there must be no criminal law on abortion does this mean that governments have no responsibility in this area? Both federal and provincial governments certainly do. Comprehensive reproductive health care is essential to women's well-being and autonomy and it is a public responsibility to ensure full and equal access to all the reproductive care women need.

First of all, there must be a significant expansion of birth control services and counselling, sex education, and research into safer and more effective means of contraception. It is hypocritical for the federal government to be considering restrictions on abortion at the same time it has been cutting back these crucial (and cost-effective) preventive measures. Secondly, equal access to abortion services and counselling must be available across the country. Both levels of government have vital roles in achieving this goal.

Rather than seeking to criminalize women and their health care providers, the federal government must move in two positive directions. First, it must use its funding powers under the *Canada Health Act* to force all provinces to provide sufficient abortion services, as it has done to prevent extra-billing. Secondly, as in other programs for regional economic development or social assistance, the federal government must provide funds to under-served areas to enable necessary facili-

ties to be established. Critics have argued that free trade and the Meech Lake constitutional framework will limit the federal government's ability to ensure equal and comprehensive social and health programs. It will be interesting to see whether these needed improvements in reproductive health services will be one of the first casualties of the new era.

Enemies of choice

Unresponsive or anti-feminist politicians are not the only obstacle to reproductive autonomy for women: a small but fanatical anti-choice minority is working hard to impose its narrow moralism on all women — they would prevent all women from having abortions, whatever their life circumstances.

"Sidewalk counsellors" subject women using free-standing abortion clinics and clinic staff to hateful and vicious harassment. In what they call "Operation Rescue" these vigilantes have tried to blockade clinics in Vancouver and Toronto and deny women access to their services by force. What other health facilities are disrupted in this way?

What lengths will anti-choice fanatics go to? When the Morgentaler Clinic first opened five years ago an arsonist tried to burn it down. A women's bookstore was destroyed as a result. Clinic staff and their families are routinely threatened. American colleagues of these enemies of choice have firebombed clinics, attacked staff and tried to destroy medical equipment while women were actually on the operating table.

So there is a great deal at stake here: nothing less than women's health and well-being. But the anti-choice "moral majority" groups have a broader political agenda than simply denying abortion: they also oppose accessible daycare, sex education and contraceptive services for young people, employment equity, and equal rights for lesbians and gays. For example, REAL Women has successfully pressured the federal government into refusing to fund feminist programs and groups that work to lessen discrimination against lesbians. Within the union movement, there have been conservative court challenges to unions supporting pro-choice and progressive campaigns.

It is crucial to keep the clinics open in the face of these attacks. There are many activities that choice supporters can get involved in. Pro-choice groups in Toronto and Vancouver have established escort services to protect clients and staff from the anti-choice's hatred and have organ-

ized many pro-choice demonstrations and events. More generally, strong movements not just for choice but for women's equality and self-determination are needed to defeat the right wing.

Final word

The supreme court throwing out the oppressive old law was a major victory — and not just for abortion rights; it showed that progressive movements can fight against consistent state and conservative opposition and win. This particular success has only been possible through the broadest alliances and support.

Much still remains to be done to pressure the state into providing the public resources to guarantee equal access to abortion and to roll back the anti-choice minority. But this too is possible if we can continue to build the strongest possible movement for choice on abortion and reproductive freedom. Solidifying alliances with unions, feminist groups, churches and a wide variety of other community groups will continue to be crucial. Because working class women, poor women and women of colour face the greatest inequality of access to adequate abortion and reproductive care, the labour movement has long played a key role in supporting the choice movement. The Ontario Federation of Labour has integrated abortion with daycare and employment equity as part of a major policy paper on winning economic equality for women. However, it appears that anti-choice advocates were more organized than in previous years and pro-choice unionists will need to watch carefully for efforts to undermine labour's strong support for choice. Individuals can help to build pro-choice campaigns in their communities, locals, and workplaces; come to and mobilize for choice demonstrations and rallies; and support our work by donating money.

If we can build this strong movement and really win free and equal access to abortion, then it will be a significant advance. But even then there will not be truly "free" choice in a society in which women earn so much less than men, have limited access to decent affordable childcare and housing, and face sexual harassment and violence. That is why we must continue to work together in all these areas to win real sexual and reproductive freedom for all women.

B. Lee has worked in the Ontario Coalition for Abortion Clinics for six years. This article was prepared with OCAC members.