

B.C. Pay Equity • Faces of Feminism • CLC Union Women

OUR TIMES

INDEPENDENT CANADIAN LABOUR MAGAZINE

MARCH 1991 VOL. 10 NO. 2 \$3



In the House On the Street

Audrey McLaughlin

Women, Protest and Power

The 1990 CLC Women's Conference



Almost 600 delegates attended the Canadian Labour Congress' Women's Conference in Ottawa last fall. The three-day conference sent a lot of women home with food for thought, and a few men, too. Opened with speeches by Shirley Carr, president of the CLC, and Audrey McLaughlin, leader of the New Democratic Party, the theme of the conference was empowering women. How to get it. How to keep it. How to use it.

Here you will find excerpts from the wrap-up speech by Judy Rebick, president of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC). You'll also find a selection of views by participants and observers on the role and place of men at the conference, and in the struggle for women's equality. Readers interested in receiving a copy of the report from the conference may contact Penni Richmond, the director of the Women's Bureau of the CLC, at 2841 Riverside Drive, Ottawa, Ontario, K1V 8X7.

A Room of Their Own

“I’m one of about eight women in a local of 650 men,” she said. “In order for the empowerment process to begin for women, they need to sometimes have a forum of their own where they don’t have to compete with men, where they feel comfortable about expressing their own ideas.” She said, “I am sick and tired of all those years I had to put up with being called a ‘fucking bitch,’ etc., etc., etc., every time I tried to open my mouth. I used to go home in tears sometimes. Or I just gave up altogether. I’m telling you right now, the labour movement needs the women. If the unions in this country don’t start to respond by listening to us, you’re not going to have our loyalty, and that’s it.”

This woman was only one of many delegates who spoke from the floor on the last day of the 1990 Canadian Labour Congress' Women's Conference in Ottawa. “Empowering Women Towards the Year 2000,”

was not based on specific issues like pay equity or affirmative action. Instead, it was “designed to have women look at power, empowerment, and how we achieve it.”

While the conference was apparently a general success, a small group of male delegates and supportive women objected strongly to the conference organizers' insistence on putting the men in a men-only workshop. Their time-consuming objections were seen by many as interfering and obstructive. But others said that the discussion around the separate workshops was crucial to understanding what it means for women to empower themselves. “I think that the men who always want to be there, guiding us,” said an observer from South Africa, “don’t always realize to what extent they actually make it difficult for us to empower ourselves.”

CLC executive vice-president Nancy Riche defended the segregation. “Some of

us went in to meet with the men-only workshop. It was one of the most difficult experiences of my life. I heard 12 or 15 brothers tell me how much they supported us. How much they wanted to learn from us. Why they came to a women's conference. I've heard a sister say they didn't need come here to talk to each other; they can do that in the local. Well, I guess that's all they did in the local — was talk to each other. Because they never found out about women's issues there, if they had to come to a women's conference.

“We set up a [men-only] workshop because men had said to us, ‘I’m having difficulty dealing with it. I don’t understand sexual harassment. I don’t know what kind of jokes I can tell. I’m not sure where I am any more, because I don’t know how to deal with the sisters.’ And we provided a place. We could have said, ‘No men’ at a women's conference, and I think we would have been justified. But we didn’t say that.

“I’m sorry if the transfer of power is a little painful.” ■

— Our Times Staff



Photographs: Photo Features Ltd.

The last Canadian Labour Congress Women's Conference was a lost opportunity for union brothers to show solidarity with their sisters. Despite their small numbers — about 30 in a group of about 600 delegates — men dominated the final plenary session without saying a word.

Some sisters passionately denounced conference organizers for segregating the male delegates into their own workshop. "The brothers weren't consulted. They'd been insulted. They hadn't been treated as equals."

As an observer on the fringes, I was astounded. All of a sudden, men were the victims and women the sexist oppressors.

When I asked, conference organizers said they assumed that brothers attending a conference, entitled "Empowering Women Towards the Year 2000," would be there to better understand sexism and how to overcome it. And that they could do this best during the workshop sessions by being grouped together. Organizers also arranged for women to speak to them about what it means to be harassed.

This arrangement permitted the sisters to speak more openly among themselves about sexual harassment, about being undervalued, intimidated and oppressed at work, and about being pressured to be a worker, a trade unionist, mother, lover and homemaker all at once. They wouldn't have to

explain and justify their feelings to doubting Thomases, or Jims or Pierres. Unfortunately, many of the male delegates couldn't deal with the reality that the sisters would feel safer and more at ease with each other and without men.

This doesn't mean that men have no place at a women's conference, or that they have no part to play in empowering women. But to act in true solidarity, union brothers have to respond to their sisters' needs as the sisters define them. We have to ask the question: "What do you need us to do?" And mean it.

Listening to what our sisters say, and respecting the way they want us to support their struggles, will require us to change. Make no mistake about it. This is not something we're used to doing.

And we may not like what the sisters would have us do, such as:

- talk to a particularly offensive co-worker about his insulting behaviour
- protest when the brothers tell a sexist joke at a union meeting
- or point out to a Local union president that he's making it hard for women to partici-

Solidarity at Low Tide

By Jim Guild

pate in union activities.

In other words, the type of work that is difficult, risky and wins you no brownie points. There is real work in challenging our own attitudes and behaviours, and those of our brothers. Most of us don't know how to do it. And, frankly, we don't know because we never felt the need to learn how to do it.

Maybe a version of Alcoholics Anonymous would work. After all, we brothers are all addicted to an unequal world which gives us privileges and power which we consciously or unconsciously refuse to give up.

Perhaps we need "Workshops for Sexist Trade Unionists: All Men Welcome, All Men Eligible."■

Jim Guild lives in Halifax, Nova Scotia. He is a labour relations officer with the Nova Scotia Nurses' Union. He is also a member of the Labour and Social Service Organization Employees Union (LASSOEU), Local 32 of the Marine Workers Federation. He accompanied his partner to the Women's Conference. She was a delegate.

Men Take No Risks

By Miriam Edelson

What a missed opportunity. Where else might men get the chance to discuss amongst themselves, with the help of trained facilitators, their collective and individual part in our society's sexist legacy? A daunting subject, yes. But to seize that task, in the safety of a workshop session, would be an exciting endeavour. Why, then, did it fall flat?

Instead of grappling with issues that block women from developing power, the men exerted theirs. They lambasted the leadership and organizers of the conference for running a separate men's workshop. Why?

I think the men were too uncomfortable to truly examine the issues at hand. Many men experience difficulty talking with one another. Often, women mediate for men. But these men were being asked to take responsibility, to look at women's oppression and to reflect upon their own conduct. They were being asked to relate that behaviour to the maintenance of patriarchal union structures. The men successfully deflected from any fundamental exploration of these crucial issues by arguing that they ought to attend women's workshops.

I think it boils down to cowardice. But what a shame. In the Public Service



Alliance of Canada, where successful male workshops have been carried out, there has been a substantive and exciting increase in support for women's issues right across the union. Important gains have been made, in part, because union sisters and brothers have engaged in the process — and recognized the need for separate space in which to debate the issues. The men at the CLC women's conference refused to respect this process. No risks were taken. And little meaningful reflection or learning occurs without taking those risks.

It is ironic that at a conference designed to enhance women's readiness to take power, and to deal with the backlash against

□ **Taking a break.** From left to right: Nancy Riche, CLC executive vice-president, Penni Richmond, director of the CLC Women's Bureau, Shirley Carr, president of the CLC. Photograph: Photo Features Ltd.

this shift, such a vigorous pocket of resistance was encountered.

We must talk about this failure. And debate it far and wide so to avoid it next time. ■

Miriam Edelson is a trade unionist who lives in Toronto.

From Judy Rebick's Closing Speech

Patriarchal Power

"Recently I've had another experience of power. Two weeks ago I met with Michael Wilson. . . I saw a form of power that was individualistic, aggressive, oppressive, arrogant and anti-democratic. We refuse that kind of power. The power to say 'Do what I want you to do or face the consequences.' The power of the boss to fire us. The power of the violent man to beat us up. The power of the Tory government to take away everything we fought for. Patriarchal power. We don't want any part of it."

What We Want

"And then the question, 'What do you women want.' You know, when I get that question on talk shows and so on, the way I answer is: 'We want equality, we want to make the same amount of money as men — we make only 65 per cent, we want the same opportunities. . . we want childcare, we want violence against women to end,' and they say, 'Oh! That's quite a lot left to be done.' And I say, 'Yes. But you know what we really want? We want to change the world.'"

Solidarity and Transforming Power

"The labour movement teaches us solidarity, and teaches notions that not everybody is on our side; that we have to know which side we're on. We learn that from the labour movement; the class distinctions in this society which, in the women's movement, we don't understand very well. And what the women's movement has to teach the labour movement is these notions of the transformation of power. A different kind of power. A sharing of power. And it isn't easy."

Risk-taking

"There's a risk in fighting for equality, and fighting for power, because it means some people have to share their power, and some people have to give up their power. In this case, white men. And a lot of men don't want to do that... I want to read you a quote from Martin Luther King. In 1963 he wrote to a group of clergymen who had declared their support for his goals, but called the violation of laws in support of them unwise and untimely. His reply is worth keeping in mind, and I quote:

'The Negroes' great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizens' Council or the Ku Klux Klan, but the white moderate who is more devoted to order than justice; who prefers a negative peace, which is the absence of tension, to a positive peace, which is the presence of justice.'"

Tory Doublespeak

"At the same time we face another enemy. In the Sixties things were clearer, right? The cops came with truncheons and they beat the shit out of us at the demonstrations. Men would get up and say 'Women belong in the home. What are you doing this for you bunch of strident bitches!' We all knew that. But now we have the prime minister get up and say, 'I am for equality. We are committed to equality.' You know, it's really easy to get confused. If we're all for equality, if the people in power are really for equality, how come we don't have it? We have to deal with that doublespeak and say, no, they are not for equality. Every policy that this Tory government has in place is anti-woman, anti-visible minority, anti-native, anti-worker. And they are doing everything they can to keep the power of the elite strong, to keep it powerful, and to stop anybody who's out of power from getting power; to destroy our collective power. That's what they're about and they are our enemies."

Violence Against Women

"There is nothing that makes women feel more powerless than violence against women. It makes us feel frightened. Alone. Powerless. The only way that changes is by talking about it, and organizing against it together. And to speak its name, whether it's in the workplace, on the campus or in society. To understand that it is not an individual problem. It is not an aberration of some lunatic guy who's beating up or murdering his spouse. It is everyone's problem. Whether it's a sexist prank at a university, sexist posters on the wall of a plant, whistles on the street... intimidation in a relation-



Photo: Nadine Chan

ship, date rape, wife battering, murder or a massacre, it all comes from the same source: individual men trying to exercise their power over individual women."

The Backlash

"There's always been a backlash to feminism. From the suffragettes on, there's always been a backlash, and that's men resisting change. It's nothing new, and don't let them tell you it's anything new. Any successful social movement — whether it's the labour movement, the women's movement, or the ANC in South Africa — any movement that's successful in fighting for social change produces a backlash. It's called polarization. That's how change happens. It would be nice if change happened another way. It would be nice if somebody said, 'Hey! This is wrong,' and everybody said, 'Right! It's wrong and we should change it.' And we all agree to change it. It's not the way change happens. It's the way the government tries to convince us change happens, but it's not. You know, as union women, as anybody who's been on a picket line knows, anybody who's been on a demonstration knows, anybody who's

fought for anything in their personal life or collectively knows, that it's struggle that makes change."

The Coalition Between Labour and the Women's Movement

"It was tough to build... Labour women being called bureaucrats inside the women's movement. And they [women unionists] never wanted to go back again to those horrible meetings where there wasn't any order and everything was completely disorganized and, you know, touchy-feely... It was awful. But we persevered. There were some of us in the women's community and some of us in the labour movement who understood the importance of that alliance. We persevered and that's how we got the solidarity in the Eaton's strike, and the solidarity of the labour movement speaking out for choice... I believe that the alliance between the women's movement and the labour movement is the most powerful force for social change we have ever seen in history. That's my view."■

Judy Rebick is the president of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC).