

July 1991

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

At the Steelworker's School I attended in Hecla Island last month, besides looking at women in the Union today, we were also given some facts dealing with women in today's society. These are not very pleasant facts but I would like to share them with you.

This report is in no way an attack on men; I think we should all take a long, hard look at a subject that is a horrendous problem to every person who has a mother, wife, sister, or daughter. The only way to even start to combat such a problem is through education. If this problem isn't addressed, the whole of society will continue to suffer the ill effects of it.

WOMEN'S EQUALITY

Labour has taken on the role of promoting the full equality of women outside the workplace, recognizing that full equality will only exist when it is present in all spheres of women's lives. At the 1990 convention, the CLC adopted a policy calling for urgent attention to be given to three issues that undermine the achievement of full equality for women: violence against women; reproductive choice and the division of household labour and family responsibilities.

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Lack of equality is most acutely evident when a specific group or class of people are regularly victimized through violent acts. Women face the risk of violence at the hands of men in every aspect of their lives: in the home, at the workplace and on the streets.

WIFE ASSAULT

The extent to which women in Canada are battered by their partners came to light in 1980 with the revelation that one in ten women were being brutalized and terrorized within the boundaries of intimate relationships. By 1987, the number of shelters had tripled to 264. Even at this, shelters turn away, on the average, one of every two women seeking escape. From the heavy use of counselling services by women who may not ever use a shelter, front-line workers believe the estimate, that almost a million women are battered each year, to be conservative. In 1988, 57% of all female homicide victims were killed by a family member, compared to 24% for men. Approximately 70% of women escaping to shelters were under age 34, and 87% had two young children on average. Overall, 75% of women using shelters come from a poverty situation. There is no other choice. Higher income women, who may be able to afford alternate housing, tend to seek advice, information and counselling from shelters. Women from rural

communities are over-represented in shelters, making up only 24% of all women, but 34% of those seeking shelter. Aboriginal women have faced an escalation in family violence, perhaps as a result of extreme poverty, extraordinarily high and rising unemployment and alcohol abuse which can lead to social dissolution and increased violence. Immigrant women represented 6% of women in shelters. Factors such as language barriers, fear of police and culture may keep these women from reporting abuse or seeking aid. Since only 29% of shelters are accessible to women with disabilities, they are condemned to an existence of violent victimization. This will remain the case until funders recognize this problem.

Battering wreaks devastation and havoc on the physical and psychological health of women, on the emotional health and future potential of their children, as well as imposing tremendous social and financial costs on the whole of society.

OUTSIDE THE HOME

Fear of sexual assault is a feeling that exists in the corner of every woman's mind. The facts explain why. A woman is sexually assaulted in the form of rape every 17 minutes. One woman in four will be sexually abused or assaulted in her lifetime, 40% of them before reaching age 18. In 1988, a study revealed that 75% of adolescent prostitutes were incest victims. Up to 90% of women can expect some form of sexual harassment on the job.

At the heart of violence against women is the refusal of men to accept that women are their equals because that means transferring to women the power to ensure their own equality. And so women live amidst a sea of pornography and advertisements that still relegate us to the level of object and portray us as appropriate victims of violence by men. Regardless of gains women have made in legislation or in the workplace, full equality will elude women as long as they remain victims of male violence.

REPRODUCTIVE FREEDOM

Integral to full equality for women is the right to reproductive choice. Self-determination, being a fundamental right of all women, necessarily implies that women are free to choose whether or not to bear children. Any attempt to interfere with a woman's right to this choice has been determined by the Supreme Court of Canada "to be a profound interference with a woman's body and thus an infringement of security of the person". The decision led to the decriminalization of abortion.

The federal government, caving into opposition, drafted new abortion legislation which makes it a criminal act to receive and perform an abortion except under specific circumstances. The bill defies the 1988 Supreme Court decision which reaffirmed the fundamental right of women to choose when to bear children.

This law represents the inability of male-dominated institutions to give power to women. As such, women remain controlled and subject to punishment in matters pertaining to their own bodies. In effect, women's bodies are state property as long as abortion remains a criminal offence under any circumstance. As long as women are perceived and treated like property, equality remains only a wishful dream.

SHARING FAMILY WORK AND RESPONSIBILITIES EQUALLY

The integration of paid work and family responsibilities is an integral part of achieving women's equality. Economic equality for women can only be achieved by assisting workers in managing their responsibilities as workers, spouses and primary caregivers. This, the equal sharing of family work and legislation that accommodates family responsibilities by allowing more flexible employment practices are essential components of any strategy designed to eliminate inequality in these spheres of women's lives.

Although participation in the labour force has increased, they are forced to take on a double burden, work and family. Family responsibilities have a significant impact on women's hours of work, type of employment and level of earning.

Women with children and a full-time job have the longest working day, spending almost seven hours at work and almost four hours on family work. As a result, leisure and sleep time are cut back creating unhealthy tension and pressure. More and more women in families with children are finding it necessary to work full-time for economic reasons. Those who work part-time usually must accept low-paid jobs with poor benefits and no career opportunities.

Men and fathers have made little adjustment in response to the unequal burden their partners bear, even though their spouses are adding significantly to the family's economic security. In 1985, partners of women who were not employed at all, contributed 1.09 hours to domestic chores. Men whose partners worked a seven hour day contributed only 1.32 hours to domestic work.

As attitudes change, perhaps men will take on a fairer share of family work. However, it is a fact that in the foreseeable future, both partners will need to participate fully in the labour force in order to maintain living standards. That being the case, Canada will have to implement legislative changes which allow greater flexibility in employment, improved maternity leave, additional parental leave, and paid family responsibility leave. Perhaps then, Canada can improve its current ranking at the bottom of Western industrialized countries in the provision of parental and maternity leave programs.

Submitted by

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DEVELOPMENT COURSE HECLA - JUNE, 1991

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To:

DATE: June 30, 1991

From:

Subject: DISTRICT 3 SUMMER SCHOOL, JUNE 16-21, 1991
"WOMEN OF STEEL" COURSE

I am very grateful to have been given the opportunity to attend the Summer School and take part in the new course, "Women of Steel".

As stated in the outline, the course did give me a better understanding of the Union structure and some of the situations women face today in the workforce.

The course outline was good; however, I found that too much emphasis was placed on areas that are not pertinent to the workplace. Right from the beginning of the course, the undertones were ones of "militant feminism", (for lack of a better term).

My opinion is that this same course, with a more objective and less bias presentation, could be of great benefit to the women within our Union. Also, the time allotted was much too great for the material covered. Possibly more material could be added to the course or the course could be offered over a shorter period of time.

This course appears to have been designed for women with little or limited involvement in the Union. I would suggest that women be encouraged to take part in other courses, (ie: Leadership, Communications, Officers' School, etc.), that give them the opportunity to work and learn with their brothers. Sometimes, segregating women, as this course did, can be detrimental to the cause. There are many women, such as myself, who wish to continue to work in their locals and need to gain the knowledge and experience necessary for advancement. I think courses such as those that I mentioned above would much better serve the purpose.

I would like to make one last suggestion. The instructors for such a course should be screened carefully. These people leave a lasting impression on our newcomers in particular and that impression should be one that will benefit our locals - brothers and sisters alike. We are both working toward the same goal - to build a stronger Union. To do this, there must be respect and cooperation among the members.

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"WOMEN OF STEEL"

SUMMARY:

- Good course outline, although a little too short for time allotted
- Great opportunity for interaction between locals/members
- Good overview of Union structure
- Helps build leadership skills
- Helps build communication skills
- Good opportunity to build networks and support systems in the District
- Good base course for women who wish to continue and advance in their Locals; Good follow up course might be "Working Together"
- Presentation could be reviewed
- Guest speakers - good idea- should deal strictly with Union education
- Course could be offered in different Areas