

# TOWARDS AN ORGANIZATION OF WORKING WOMEN

Discussion paper for working women's workshop (women's caucus)

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Jean Rands

About 85 percent of working women in Canada are completely unorganized. They have no union protection, no job security, lousy wages. About half of them are married. They suffer the contradictions of women's role in this society most severely -- the contradiction between the role of cheap labor in the work force, and the role of unpaid labor in the home.

Even those women who are in unions are hardly organized. Few of them participate actively in their unions, or are represented in the leadership, because the labor movement itself does little to overcome the problems of working women, particularly those with children. Very few unions have even fought for equal pay, a demand which is clearly in the interests of men as well as women workers. Unions themselves perpetuate discrimination against women in hiring. No unions have fought for free day care as a right for working women. They do not even make special provisions to enable women with children to attend union meetings.

The demands that women workers must make when they organize in their own self-interest cut across the present structure of the trade union movement. The major issues -- equal pay and equal job opportunity, control of hiring and job classifications, day care, an end to sexual objectification on the job and in hiring -- are questions that cut across plants and offices, trades and occupations.

## WHAT KIND OF ORGANIZATION?

In many ways, the situation of women workers today is similar to that of the industrial workingclass before the rise of the CIO. Women workers are overwhelmingly unorganized, and therefore considered by all (including the trade union movement) 'unorganizable'.

We can learn from the history of the early organizations of industrial workers, like the wobblies.

The kind of organization we need is one that is as flexible as possible, that can include women who are not in a position to organize their workplace/ that can also fight for bargaining rights and win victories in one or another office, restaurant, plant, etc. Most of the early labor organizations were like that -- they included individual membership, many people who were never successful in establishing a collective agreement in their own place of work.

What is required is a women's union (perhaps the 'Working Women's Organizing Committee'), certified as a union so that we could fight for bargaining rights in specific struggles. Unlike present unions, the organization would cut across divisions of blue collar/white collar, unemployed/employed, etc.

## THE PROGRAM

Membership in the union would be open to those who supported the major demands of women workers.

Equal pay, with the recognition that equal pay is not enough; that equal pay can often be against the immediate self-interest of women workers; that it is at best meaningless without a struggle against discrimination in hiring, and for free day care.

Union hiring and control of job classifications: This is extremely important to cut across the hierarchy in offices which divides workers, to establish job security for women workers, to end the parasitic part-time

employment agencies, to stop hiring on the basis of sex rather than qualifications, and to end the situation where women can be hired and fired on the basis of how they dress or wear their hair, and are forced to compete with one another as sexual objects.

Day care: This kind of flexible organization would be in a position to fight for day care as part of union contracts in specific plants or offices, and on a city-wide or community level as well. And, of course, day care raises all kinds of questions about the family structure of this society, the priorities of a society which provides no adequate day care and makes children the individual responsibility (and private property) of their parents.

And of course an organization of working women would take up more general questions: the right to safe abortion and birth control;; a challenge to the educational system which channels women students into low-paying women's jobs.

#### RELATIONSHIP TO THE TRADE UNION MOVEMENT

Our objective is not to build a traditional union structure but to organize working women. The union charter would enable us to carry out struggles that the present unions will not undertake. But any unit which achieved bargaining rights would have complete autonomy and be free to affiliate to any existing union, or to remain independent. The women's union would not consist of affiliates, but of individual voluntary membership.

This means that we would not be competing with the existing unions. This does not necessarily mean that they wouldn't be hostile, or course. But this kind of position would effectively cut across the jurisdictional haggling and empire-building which would be the basis of any hostility.

From the beginning, the women's union would include members of other unions. We wouldn't be able to affiliate to labor councils or federation (with the likely exception of the Council of Canadian Unions) but there would be no reason for us to want to, anyway. Our work outside those bodies would put far more pressure on them to organize women workers than any number of speeches at conventions. As well, we would have caucuses of women workers in most of those unions that would be involved anyway.

We may well be accused of dividing the working class and all. But the unity of the CLC is not the unity of the working class. Solidarity is built on picket lines, from the bottom up, not in the board rooms of the B.C. Fed. Their unity is based on the division of the workingclass: by sex, by trade, by political history, by jurisdictional disputes. A women's union would help, in the long run, to develop workingclass solidarity by organizing women to refuse to be cheap labor and scabs, and by cutting across all those divisions.

#### THE PERSPECTIVE

It is true that working women are not 'unorganizable'; but it is also true that it won't be easy. Again like the early labor movement, there will be more defeats than victories in the beginning. Women will be fired, strikes will be lost. But the only chance of surviving these defeats and learning from them lies in an organization which is prepared to struggle, which understands the common problems of all women workers and can bring them together.