

Report from CLE Women's Conf.

FINAL REPORT

From husbands who won't allow their wives to attend union meetings to volunteer workers taking over women's full-time jobs and employers proposing birth control pills in the water supply as an alternative to maternity leave -- there was no shortage of examples of the every day struggles of women workers once delegates began sharing their experiences in the 22 conference workshops.

Through some often emotional discussion, participants were encouraged and reassured as they recognized themselves in the experiences of others.

Mostly, we tried to establish relationships between the events of our daily lives and the big Canadian political game, and we labored, sometimes painfully, to reassemble the pieces of this vast puzzle:

- More and more regular full-time jobs are lost or transformed into part-time positions. Strangely, we see our work shifts being transferred from day-time to night-time. The lack of day care sometimes forces us to quit our jobs.
- Thus we have the unpleasant feeling of becoming poorer, and of being forced to depend on our spouse...when there is one! How difficult it is then to speak strongly of "dignity", "justice" or "equality"! Hard also to believe that a wage for household work is all that's needed to fix the ailing the Canadian economy...
- Somehow we tend to suspect -- rightly, no doubt -- that pressures everywhere want us back at home. How easy also to see that if we withdraw from public life, men will be left with all of the power.

Identifying Our Enemies

Some workshops focused on the threat of R.E.A.L. Women. They looked at how and why that group refuses to give working women a choice. It was agreed that they are intent on trying to separate women at home from women at work. Others had lengthy discussions on policies of right-wing governments, such as free trade, privatization and deregulation. One workshop noted that the B.C. government's backlash began in 1983 with 22 pieces of legislation, all impacting negatively on women. In addition, Premier Vander Zalm's government has "blessed" the anti-abortion movement.

Employers like to have an enormous pool of cheap labour, whether it be women or the latest wave of immigrants, and they are recognized as opponents of progress toward equality, like equal pay for work of equal value.

The anti-union bias of the media was discussed in some of the workshops. The failure of our education system to address issues of concern to female high-school students, such as contraception and reproductive freedom was also addressed.

Our Role in Society

As for the sharing of household tasks, delegates were quick to agree that it is virtually non-existent. One almost has to laugh at the six-fold vision of the role of women as:

- workers
- housekeepers
- lovers
- educators of their children
- educators of their husband
- activists

Indeed, the consequences of this perspective are no laughing matter. Who can live like this without anger, stress or guilt feelings, without burning out...or even risking her mental health or turning to the false solace of drugs or alcohol?

But we are determined to expose our reality, and to take the necessary means of action.

Where We Stand

We all believe that shared family responsibilities are an essential element to better and more employment opportunities for women. Some signs of progress in this area were brought out in workshop discussions. First of all, we felt justified in our expectation that family responsibilities should be shared and recognized and that women should not perceive their partners' participation in household tasks and child care as a favour. There was a sense that our partners may be aware of the need for them to share these responsibilities, but we are a long way from seeing this awareness put into action.

If family responsibilities are not shared, unions are robbed of women's involvement.

Our discussions surrounding the issue of reproductive freedom were energized by the timely decision of the Supreme Court of Canada recognizing a woman's right to choose. Every mother must be a willing mother and freedom of choice is a basic right and a key part of women's struggle for economic and social equality.

An interesting observation in one of the workshops was that the younger generation appears to be assuming societal values that were prevalent 20 or 30 years ago, such as the notion that women don't need an education.

Participants gave examples of how deregulation, privatization, free trade, contracting-out, the use of volunteers and promotion of the "entrepreneurial spirit" translated into loss of jobs and job opportunities for women:

- o the deregulation of Quebec Air has resulted in women being laid-off;
- o plant closures under free trade; for example, tanneries and shoe factories (large employers of women);
- o privatization and contracting out in the public sector means job losses for women. The Alberta Nurses' strike was discussed in many workshops. Others looked at the situation with Hydro Québec;
- o new management strategies that deliberately create divisions between men and women undermine the solidarity of unions. In addition, threats of plant closures are used to influence negotiations.

In several workshops, delegates noted that racism and human rights violations are means by which the right-wing divides workers. One group suggested that the backlash against immigrant workers in the workplace would be lessened if we didn't have to "compete" for jobs.

We also felt that unions are not taking the problem of racism seriously and are, therefore, not doing enough about it.

Women who are sexually harassed often feel guilty about it. There are attitudes of acceptance of harassment and a fear of speaking out on it. Far too often, we do not get the support we need from our unions.

We shared many concerns that centered around the need for tolerance and respect of workers' rights to freedom from discrimination. The workshops provided us with an opportunity to speak frankly about issues like sexual orientation and racism, something we rarely have the chance to do.

Our Reaction

While participants recognized that part-time jobs must not be permitted to erode full-time jobs, we emphasized the need for women and all trade unionists to remain united. "Don't pit one group of workers against another," as one delegate put it. We stressed the need to build unity by organizing part-time workers and bargaining improved benefits and working conditions.

Support for workers with family responsibilities must come through collective bargaining by negotiating:

- stable shifts
- better parental leave
- better pensions
- fully-paid maternity leave
- the continuation of benefits during maternity and parental leave
- retraining and job security
- paid leave for family responsibilities
- reduced working hours

We were reminded that our sisters who work out of their homes for industries that pay poor wages and provide few, if any, benefits need our support.

Pressuring for provincial and federal legislation that will be supportive of workers' family lives must also be an integral part of our agenda.

Both collective bargaining and political action must also be utilized to counter the present employment trends. We expressed the need for:

- o full employment;
- o provisions that limit the use of volunteers and part-time work;

- o education and training for women, particularly in the area of non-traditional jobs;
- o strengthening of our seniority provisions;
- o continuing our work within coalitions against free trade;
- o actions to stop privatization.

Education is the key to fighting racism. Unions can set an example by being representative of their membership through their elected bodies and staff. Also, as individuals, we should concentrate on "breaking down the walls" and not on building them.

Participants examined alternatives for dealing with sexual harassment such as grievance procedures, including a buddy system that would provide support for victims and grievors. We agreed that stronger contract language on this issue is needed and that the elimination of sexual harassment will come about largely as a result of education and increased awareness among co-workers and union officers.

Taking Hold of Our Future

It is not easy to take a bearing on the current social, economic and political situation: some need weeks to do it, others never succeed...even when theirs have been charged with the responsibility of governing a country.

But we have been able to draw the maximum benefits from our discussions, perceiving the multiplicity of regional differences, applauding the victories of our sisters, feeling also, with sadness and solidarity, the fragility of certain sectors.

However, discussions are not enough. Our greater awareness needs to be complemented by action. And through this conference, we have added to the list of our common actions: from the private lives to the political arena, we have shown that women are intent on changing the present and shaping the future.

To take hold of our future, it is urgent to act now, in the present.

We want to be fully involved in our workplaces, our unions and in political life.

What course of action?

Unanimously, we feel the need to spread the discussions of this Conference in our workplaces, through newsletters, by telephone contacts, and during coffee breaks. We would like our members to show interest in the CLC leaflets we will distribute for the activities of coalitions who share our ideas, for the history of the women's movement.

We aim not only to start a process of reflection on the stakes at hand, but also to provide our members with the opportunity to realize respect and dignity and to assemble the pieces of the puzzle. We also believe we can create new women's networks and strengthen existing ones for concrete action.

A structured organization is essential if we want to see women elected locally and in our unions. We're certainly not short of tasks to be done: organizing courses and political action committees, and the inclusion of demands for equal pay, maternity and parental leave, affirmative action programs, day care, etc., in the next round of negotiations.

To give new life to the labour movement, we also feel it important for our unions to seriously reflect the concerns of women.

The information resulting from this Conference must work its way through other parts of our structures. Reports, union publications, seminars, full day workshops, must reflect and

carry on the themes of this Conference. We can, for instance, invite resource people or speakers to union meetings.

But, to organize such events, we need political will and financial resources. On this subject, the firm will of participants is striking: we demand the necessary financial resources to hold meetings of activists, we demand full-time union people to work on women's issues, we demand that a greater part of union budgets be designated for education programs on women's issues, and for publicity to explain the need for women to unionize, and the benefits to be derived from unionization. On this latter point, we are asking the CLC to develop a course on organizing women workers.

With regard to our unions, we notice how few women are represented in their structures: the mosaic of the Canadian population is far from being numerically represented in the ranks of union leaders or union employees. That's why means have been devised to change this situation. Education programs, support of women candidates and the choice of targets (executive, negotiation committee), lighter union tasks, modification of union constitutions, are all means to overcome the barriers faced by women and minorities.

Finally, this strategy includes measures to support recognition of women within unions: the feminization of documents, the provision of day care services during union meetings and educational workshops, the organization of conference workshops on sexual harassment.

And, of course, to respect our sense of celebration and history, we must continue to celebrate the International Day of Women, March 8. On that day, we can stop a moment to look where we stand, and reinforce our women's networks. The daring among us would even promote March 8 as a day of general strike for women, to underline the importance of our work.

How Far Should We Go?

Is there a limit to our involvement as union activists, workers and fully participating citizens?

As women, we realize we hold an important political force, which has not fully been put to use. First steps have to be taken: women have to become aware of political stakes, they must learn to question the programs of political parties. They must become aware of the importance of their right to vote, and use it.

Next, let's check how candidates stand on women's issues in the next federal election. Let us then remind our elected representatives that they must respect their electoral promises and be accountable to Canadian women.

Let us lobby effectively towards our goals of equality.

Let us choose to promote and elect women from the same background as us -- or at least, men who are willing to go along with our demands for change. In this perspective, the NDP offers us assurances.

To take hold of our future, let us choose to become ourselves candidates for school board, municipal, provincial and federal elections.

We know how much work still needs to be done, but we must let our needs and our interests be known. In labour councils, federations, coalitions, information meetings in schools, through our relationship with the international labour movement, we can promote our views and set the course of discussions.

This political activism is essential if we aim to change legislation in the areas of the unionization of women, affirmative action programs and child care, and this political

activism will be only one of the many ways that we will reflect our determination to take hold of our future.