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DAVID HUGHES,
new President of O.S.S.T.F.



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Mail and Female

by Ferne Sinkins

A major breakthrough in maternity leave in Ontario was reached during the recent postal strike. The writer feels that OSSTF members across the province could win the same benefit.

"Maternity Leave Likely to Spread", "The Maternity Issue to Become 'Way of Future'" are two of many such headlines that appeared in Toronto newspapers during the recent postal strike. 24,000 employees went without salaries for six weeks and endured vitriolic public criticism largely to achieve a benefit that, based on statistics, will affect only 239 members a year. These figures indicate that the strike was fought on a matter of principle—that fully paid maternity leave is a justifiable right in a society that treats its members as equals.

A skiing buddy of mine married in the mid sixties. She liked children and decided to begin raising a family. As there were no maternity leave provisions she resigned, confident she would return to teaching once the children started school. By 1973, of course, when she was ready to come back, declining enrolment had made it virtually impossible to obtain a position.

Last year, a colleague took maternity leave, ensured of her position upon return and maintenance of her seniority as spelled out in her collective agreement. She commented to me that she found it somewhat humiliating to have to apply for unemployment insurance. The reduction in pay was also awkward as she and her husband had just purchased a house in order to have what they considered a suitable environment for their child.

In spite of the obvious advantages my colleague had over the first woman, the fact emerges that the full time two income family is setting the economic pace in the 80's. The average house price in Metro Toronto of \$103,900 with a mortgage rate of 22.5 percent is convincing evidence of this.

Proponents of unpaid maternity leave point out that having children is a personal and private decision made by a couple. If two people want children, they should be prepared to sacrifice part of the wife's salary for four months. I question whether it is reasonable to expect the couple who have a child to lose ground financially to the couple who decide not to have children. If the couple with children are expected to make the sacrifice for the physically necessary absence of the woman from work,

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perhaps that couple should be expected to pay all the costs for that child's education. Perhaps health, dental and insurance plans that have special rates for families should all revert to the single rate only. After all, it was a personal decision of the couple and they have to be prepared to "sacrifice" in order to have a family. Meanwhile, the childless couple can go on to better its position unencumbered with education taxes and higher insurance costs in order to pay for "someone else's children".

Society has already committed itself to sharing the responsibility for what are generally considered basic needs that everyone has a right to—education and medical care. Added to these should be full income protection during the time needed to bear a child.

Some argue that paid maternity leave is a discriminatory benefit—that while we all would contribute to its cost, only pregnant female employees would profit from it. Do the same people point out that paid sick leave is discriminatory as only those who are sick benefit from it? Yes, but, the debate continues, women choose to be pregnant but people do not choose to be sick. This is a questionable statement. Do people indeed not "choose" to be sick? Statistics constantly show that smoking, excessive drinking of alcohol, lack of exercise and poor eating habits contribute to poor health. Yet how many people "choose" to continue a life style that is bound to result in days off work? How many people participate eagerly in highly dangerous sports that are likely to cause physical damage that could well result in extended absences later in life?

It can be said that in a time of high inflation an additional benefit like paid maternity leave would only add to inflationary pressures. What this criticism in effect is saying is that in order to help reduce inflation, a small

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select group of workers should periodically go without full salary. Why are pregnant women chosen to be this select group?

Requests for fully paid maternity leave began appearing in some teachers' negotiations briefs last year. Under the Employment Standards Act of 1974,

(a) a teacher's employment may not be terminated because of pregnancy

(b) a teacher who is pregnant and has been employed by the board for at least twelve months and eleven weeks preceding the day of delivery shall be entitled to seventeen weeks' leave

(c) upon return to work, the teacher shall have the same position or alternative work of a comparable nature with wages and seniority equal to those before the leave began.

These are the minimum maternity benefits that a school board must provide to comply with the law. There is absolutely nothing to prevent a board from granting benefits in addition to the legal minimum. In fact, many boards in Ontario have already done so. Additional maternity benefits achieved through negotiations include such items as accumulation of seniority during the seventeen week leave and assurance of one's previous position upon return.

Implementation of paid maternity leave should not be delayed by the promise of a committee to research the topic. Extensive research has already been done.

In 1979, Quebec teachers achieved through collective bargaining twenty weeks of fully paid maternity leave (minus pension and unemployment insurance contributions which total about 7 percent). As in the case of the postal workers, the employer pays the full salary for the first two weeks (when the employee is not entitled to unemployment insurance) and through a supplemental unemployment benefits plan, supplements the unemployment insurance for the remainder of the leave to a total of 93 percent of the total salary. Under the

Quebec plan, a pregnant teacher continues to benefit from insurance plans, to accumulate sick leave days, seniority, experience and continuous service in terms of job security. The distribution of the twenty weeks of leave is at the choice of the teacher. To be eligible, the teacher must have accumulated twenty weeks of service in the public or para-public sector.

This plan removes much of the punitive nature of maternity leave. A teacher is able to have a child without the surrounding insecurities of loss of income and loss of position. Surely it is a benefit to society in general to have children born into an environment that is free of unnecessary insecurities and financial deprivation. Studies maintain that the first few months of a child's life are crucial to its later psychological well being. If, as a society, we are committed to paying for the education of children, we should go the extra small step and help make what are probably the most important months of a person's life as beneficial as possible.

With the impetus provided by the postal workers' achievements, with pressure already mounting from other public groups, now is the time for teachers in Ontario to negotiate for fully paid maternity leave.

Some boards have resisted providing this benefit saying they do not want to pioneer in this area, that this kind of social reform should be government initiated.

The Federal government last year committed itself to pension reform and to improvements in maternity leave. Over the summer, announcements were made that pension reform would have to be delayed for at least a year to provide more research time. The government's resistance to the postal workers' request for paid maternity leave implies it is not seriously contemplating reforms in this area in the near future. It is clear that any progress in maternity benefits will have to come from teachers themselves or maternity leave, like pension reform, may be delayed indefinitely "for further study".

The pioneering has been done in Canada by Quebec teachers and the postal workers. Last year the OSSTF Provincial Collective Bargaining

Committee prepared guidelines for Districts negotiating paid maternity leave. Support of the concept is a policy of OSSTF. The newly formed Provincial Status of Women Committee has members with expertise on the topic. Information is readily available from both these Provincial Committees and the Provincial Library.

Individual District members and District committees should let their negotiators know that paid maternity leave is to be a priority in their negotiations. Motions at Council meetings can bring the subject to the attention of District Executives.

Many forces are coming together to make this the year to achieve a right that is fair and just—paid maternity leave. Its achievement will require the support of teachers across the province. Let us not lose this opportunity. ●

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