

## “Women must do it for themselves” Organizing Working Women into SORWUC (1972-1986)

Janet Nicol

As feminist ideas began to ignite women to action during the tumultuous 1960s, several Simon Fraser University students formed the Vancouver Women’s Caucus in 1968. Two years later, the group came down from the mountain campus and invited working women and “housewives” in the city to join the conversation on women’s rights.

Feminism wasn’t just about middle-class women’s concerns, some caucus members argued. Working-class women wanted a living wage and workplace equality too. And so the Working Women’s Association (WWA) was born. The WWA actively supported women on picket lines. They discussed the problems arising from the fact women in the workforce made half the wages of men and 80% of working women in British Columbia were not in unions.

The association examined the sexist attitudes which kept women in low wage, gender-segregated occupations in offices, restaurants and department stores. Women only worked for “pin money,” was the prevailing notion. Marriage and motherhood were their true vocation. But in reality, many married women were “one paycheque away from poverty” and single mothers were financially better off on social assistance after daycare costs were factored in, than working in “pink collar” jobs.

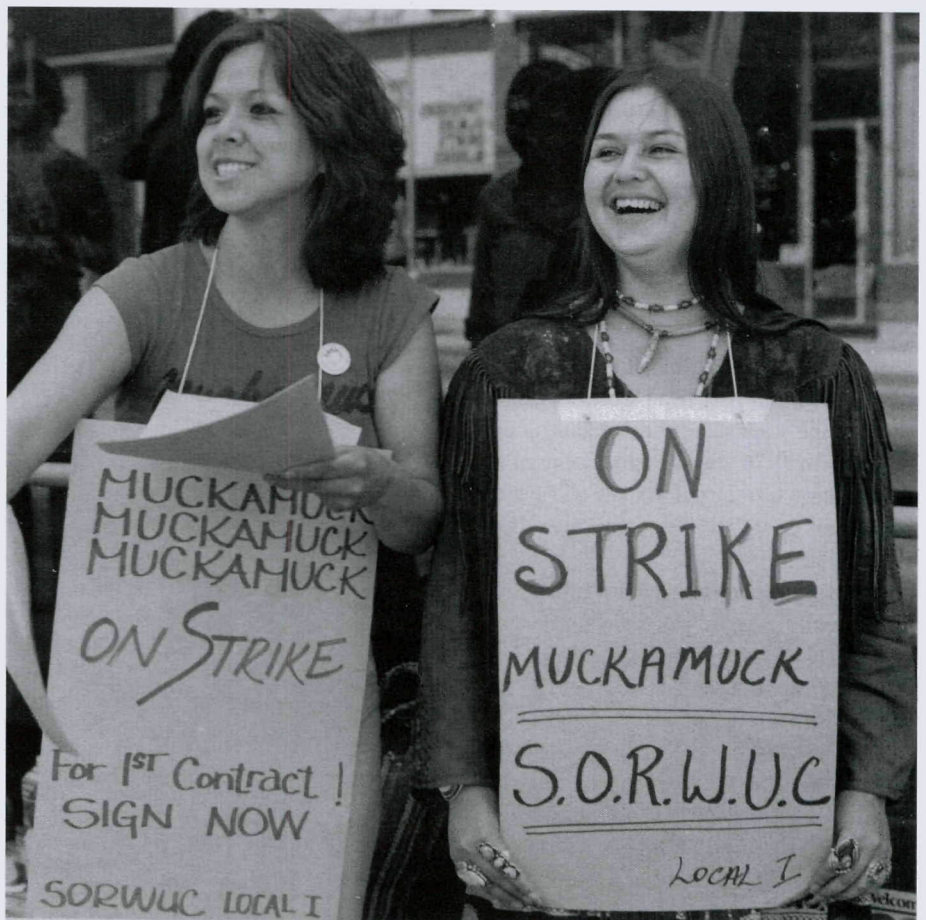
Unions offered a vehicle to make real changes in women’s lives. In 1972, 24 women formed the Service, Office, and Retail Union of Canada (SORWUC). The group drew up a uniquely democratic union constitution that gave members control over leadership positions and set limits on terms of office and wages of paid representatives.

“We decided to organize independently

mostly because the overwhelming majority of women are not organized and the existing unions haven’t done much about it,” Jean Rands, a clerical worker and SORWUC founder, told the media, in 1972. “Established union leadership has become conservative. They’re not prepared to fight.” As for international unions, Rands said a union leader in New York shouldn’t have the power to decide whether workers in Vancouver could strike. “This is a new union that the members will control.”

Some of the founders of SORWUC

(including Rands) had worked at the University of British Columbia (UBC) and helped organize an independent union of clerical and library workers into the Association of University and College Employees (AUCE). Other college and university workers in Vancouver began organizing into their own AUCE locals. Workers controlled negotiations and the results were impressive. AUCE’s first contract at UBC in 1974, gave the group of mostly female employees a \$225 per month wage increase.



Two First Nations women striking on the Muckamuck restaurant picket line in 1975.

PAT DAVITT

“Existing unions have done nothing to organize female workers,” Rands believed. “Women must do it for themselves.”

### Organizing women into SORWUC

SORWUC volunteer organizers spent many early mornings handing out leaflets to women on their way to work in downtown offices. Activists also offered free lunch time workshops at the YWCA and the library. By 1975, SORWUC had organized 15 workplaces and had 150 members, most women working in offices, daycare centres and social services.

Dealing with the “office wife syndrome” was an issue SORWUC confronted. Women were often required to get coffee for their (mostly male) bosses or run personal errands, such as buying gifts or picking up dry cleaning. Secretaries in a small law firm who organized into SORWUC negotiated a ground-breaking contract clause which guaranteed they “will not be required to do work of a personal nature for the employer.”

“The big unions were making no serious effort to organize working women, especially those in small offices of under ten employees,” Pat Barter, an office worker and SORWUC organizer told a newspaper reporter in 1976.

### Organizing in the restaurant industry

Margot Holmes was employed as a waitress at Bimini’s neighborhood pub on Vancouver’s west side. She was among twenty full and part-time workers unhappy with the wages and the scheduling procedures. In 1976, Holmes and some of her co-workers contacted six unions before choosing SORWUC to organize their workplace.

“The decision was based on the fact that we could write our own contract...” Holmes said, “...and they (SORWUC) let us do the organizing.”

On January 24, 1977 workers at Bimini’s were certified as a union and began negotiating with the owner. The employer was particularly adamant in opposing a ‘closed shop’ — a vital contract clause which ensured all employees joined the union.

In October, the staff voted 13 to 7 in

favor of a strike — the first by pub employees in the province. The employer hired strike breakers to keep his business operating while staff, along with SORWUC activists and supporters, formed a picket line at the pub entrance. Strikers gained public support, discouraging potential customers from entering.

A month into the strike, a representative of the international-based Hotel, Restaurant and Bartenders Union (HRBU), Local 40, crossed the Bimini’s picket line and signed up strike breakers. Outraged, more than 50 SORWUC strikers and sup-

porters picketed the HRBU headquarters.

A HRBU official defended his union and accused SORWUC of “splitting up the industry.” He argued restaurant workers had been under HRBU jurisdiction “since 1900.” The official also considered SORWUC a “women’s liberation” organization rather than a trade union. The British Columbia Federation of Labour disagreed and threatened HRBU with expulsion if they did not withdraw their certification application. HRBU complied but still complained to the press over SORWUC’s “encroachment.”



Jean Rands (far left), one of the founders of SORWUC, stands by others in front of SORWUC banner while setting up for an annual Vancouver peace march.

JEAN RANDS

"They claim they have had jurisdiction since 1900," Holmes countered, "which means that they've had 77 years to organize women. And where were they?"

After a ten week strike, the employer agreed to bargain. The parties reached a one-year agreement, following binding arbitration on some issues. Wages increased from \$3.75 an hour to \$5.00 and benefits were substantially improved too — but the union had to accept a modified union shop. This meant strikers and strike breakers would work together.

Two months went by with a divisive staff coping under the new contract, when the employer applied to decertify the union. The British Columbia Labour Relations Board (LRB) complied, despite the union's best efforts to argue against the application. Only five of the original 23 staff were left working at Bimini's at this point. It came as no surprise when the majority of workers voted to decertify. Management had "won."

"I think the LRB was really negligent in allowing the vote to take place when the whole history of Bimini's has been one unfair labour practise after another," Holmes told the press.

Despite the bitter outcome, Holmes did not regret the experience. She noted workers at Jerry's Cove neighborhood pub, also on the city's west side, organized with SORWUC and achieved fair contracts, without intense acrimony.

"SORWUC encouraged us to take an active role in our lives," Holmes said, "and taught us how that made us more confident about standing up for our rights. And for others' rights."

Ethel Gardner was among the 21 aboriginal women and men working at the Muckamuck Restaurant in downtown Vancouver, cooking and serving First Nations cuisine. Her employer was comprised of three Americans, who also had investments in art galleries and other restaurants in British Columbia and California.

As Gardner tells the story:

"A few incidents occurred which got the staff upset. The cook was charged for getting the soup burnt and I was fined for leaving the bannock out overnight. ...Incidents such as these led a few of us to

go to the Labour Standards Board where we were told we needed a union in order to enforce our grievances. I went back to the employment agency (which had connected Gardner to this job) and said I wanted to quit, that the employer was racist. The counsellor said, "Why don't you join a union?" She told me about SORWUC's organizing efforts at Jerry's Cove and Bimini's. I called SORWUC and met with two union reps. They talked about the union and suggested we talk to the unionized employees at Jerry's Cove, which we did."

The workers signed union cards and were certified on March 20, 1978. When the employers received the union notification, "all hell broke loose," as a Muckamuck employee told the Vancouver Sun newspaper:

"The primary union organizer was fired the day that management was notified of the application for certification. Since then six more of us have been fired or intimidated into quitting. All seven are union members, most quite active."

Unfair labour practises followed, along with attempts to begin contract talks. Management contacted First Nations leaders in an attempt to act against the union workers and tried to bring in the HRBU to "raid" SORWUC. They also circulated

anti-union literature in the neighbourhood.

With relations in complete disrepair, the restaurant workers took a strike vote. The majority voted in favour and on June 1, a picket line formed in front the restaurant. After closing for the first six months of the strike, management re-opened with strike breakers, many deliberately hired from the First Nations community. Now called the "Chilcotin Bar Seven", the business had a 'cowboy' theme. Verbal and physical abuse on the picket line was pervasive and 'counter pickets' by strike breakers created confusing 'street theatre' for passers-by.

The first of three applications by the employer to decertify the union was made in January of 1979. The second was August 25 of the same year and the third, May 14, 1980. Remarkably a majority of the original staff remained steadfast, testifying at each hearing that they supported the union and were prepared to return to work when the dispute ended. In all three applications, the LRB ruled in favor of the union.

Few customers crossed the picket line and by the spring of 1980, management was operating the restaurant on weekends only. Soon after, they shut down. On April 25, 1981, the LRB finally responded to SORWUC's unfair labour applications. The main finding was that the Muckamuck



SORWUC bank workers and supporters protest firing of two bank workers at an organized bank in Gibsons, British Columbia.

management had not bargained in good faith. A year and a half later, the LRB applied remedies which included that management owed the union \$10,000 in compensation. SORWUC was never able to collect the money as the owners had withdrawn all assets from BC and moved back to the United States.

Gardner spoke of the positive aspects of a challenging experience, "Looking back now, I see how we took it upon ourselves as a group of Native workers to make a statement that we weren't going to be run in that way. So I think it was a success. We learned a lot, gained a lot and it was empowering."

### Organizing Bank Workers

Bank tellers frequently worked involuntary and unpaid overtime. This provoked employees at the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce (CIBC), at Vancouver's Victory Square branch to join SORWUC in 1976. They formed a local within the union called the United Bank Workers (UBW). Over the ensuing months several other BC bank employees, repre-

sented four of the five Canadian chartered banks, were signing union cards too.

"The wages are below those of waitresses and maids," Jackie Ainsworth, a CIBC teller at Victory Square, told the press. "That's the reason unionizing is happening in the banks."

"Our office is swamped with calls," said Ainsworth's co-worker Dodie Zerr, President of the UBW. "And no wonder, when we compare our wages to bank profits. The base rate for workers, most of whom are women, varies from \$500 to \$600 per month while bank profits were up 46% from 1974."

SORWUC had a major legal challenge to overcome before contract negotiations could begin. The employers argued a single bargaining unit consists of all branches of a bank across Canada. They took this claim to the Canadian Labour Relations Board (CLRB). SORWUC countered, stating the banks' position was unreasonable, preventing workers from exercising the right to unionize. Each bank branch comprises a bargaining unit, the union affirmed. After lengthy deliberation, on

June 14, 1977, the CLRB ruled in SORWUC's favor.

It was a landmark legal victory that gave unions the go-ahead to organize, branch by branch, Canada's 145,000 bank workers, three-quarters of whom were women. Over a two year period, 700 bank workers joined the United Bank Workers of SORWUC.

But the logistics and legal costs of organizing was pulling SORWUC under. Financial donations by supportive union locals, individuals and community groups still didn't cover expenses. SORWUC also had to fight harassment, layoffs and other unfair labour practices.

Carol Dulyk and Eileen Quigley, bank workers at the CIBC branch in Gibsons, a town on BC's Sunshine Coast, were fired for joining SORWUC. In a show of support, SORWUC organized 100 supporters to picket outside their branch. "The Bank of Commerce in Gibsons has to realize it cannot get away with firing union organizers," Sheree Butt, a bank worker and organizer, told the press in 1978.

SORWUC requested financial help



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from the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), but were unwilling to accept their terms. To make matters worse, the CLC's affiliated union, the Office and Technical Employees Union (OTEU), was undermining SORWUC's efforts by instigating its own bank drive. The greatest blow came in the spring of 1978, when bank employers froze wages among staff in unionized branches, while giving non-union branch employees wage increases and improved benefits. SORWUC filed a complaint before the labour board — and lost.

"We are taking on some of the most powerful organizations in the country," Heather MacNeill, a SORWUC organizer told the media, "and we know that psychologically we need the support of the trade union movement. We need all the support we can get."

"The CLC said we couldn't win but we went in there, we fought the legal battles and we organized like hell. We didn't worry about costs."

Unable to gain the financial and moral support of the broader labour movement, and after exploring all tactical options, SORWUC reluctantly withdrew from branch-by-branch negotiations for the 22 branches in B.C. and two branches in Saskatchewan. "We were sad, angry and exhausted," an organizer later recalled.

### Wins and losses

Women workers knew their efforts had made a difference, despite the loss, and a group came together to write a book called "An Account to Settle: The Story of the United Bank Workers (SORWUC)." A second effort to organize banks was tried four years later, but the momentum could not be re-captured. In 1986, SORWUC disbanded.

"The reason for the creation of AUCE and SORWUC is the same as the reason for the creation of the present women's movement," a group of feminist activists wrote in 1982. "We learned that in the trade union movement, as in the male-dominated left and in society at large, our concerns (as women workers) are treated as secondary."

SORWUC shook up some of the toughest industries to organize — including

banks and restaurants — and challenged the union movement's complacency, holding up the ideal of independent unions, controlled by its membership. The efforts of the bank workers inspired employees at a number of small banks and credit unions across Canada to unionize and improved overall working conditions. The lessons of the SORWUC still hold today. Only when greater numbers of women working in these industries organize, will substantial changes occur. ❧

**Janet Nicol** is a teacher, writer and former SORWUC activist. She contributed as a researcher to a series about Working People and Labour history in British Columbia, produced by Landrock Entertainment Inc. for the Knowledge Network. The series began airing in 2013.

### Further Reading:

**An Account to Settle: The Story of the United Bank Workers: SORWUC**, Press Gang Publishers, Vancouver, by the Bank Book Collective, 1979

**Getting Organized in the Feminist Unions**, an article by Jackie Ainsworth, Ann Hutchison, Susan Margaret, Michele Pujol, Sheila Perret, Mary Jean Rands, Star Rosenthal in **Still Ain't Satisfied: Canadian Feminism Today**. The Women's Press, Toronto, 1982.

**Labour, Work and Working People: A Working Class and Labour History Walking Tour**, booklet produced by the Vancouver and District Labour Council and Pacific Northwest Labour History Association, Downtown Tour: #3 – Photo: Bank of Commerce, 300 West Hastings Street and brief commentary: "The issue of involuntary and unpaid overtime work provoked six women from this branch to initiate a major drive to organize BC bank workers in 1976."

Janet Mary Nicol, **Unions Aren't Native: the Muckamuck Restaurant Labour Dispute, Vancouver, BC (1978-1983)** Labour/Le Travail, 40 (Fall 1997), 235-51.

Julia Maureen Smith, **Organizing the Unorganized: The Service, Office, and Retail Workers' Union of Canada (SORWUC), 1972-1986**, Master of Arts, Simon Fraser University, 2009.

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