

In 1976, a group of women bank workers decided to organize their workplace. The banks were enraged. When they decided to do it themselves, the big unions were upstaged. Over the next two years, nearly a thousand bank employees in western Canada participated in a unionizing drive that challenged not only the banks but organized labour's approach to a workplace they had long considered beyond their range of union activity.

This is the story of the United Bank Workers of SORWUC (Service, Office and Retail Workers Union of Canada). With honesty and humour the clerks and tellers of the UBW tell why they decided to take on the banks and what happened when they did.

What!

A union in the banks ?

**Not impossible ...
Inevitable.**



AN ACCOUNT TO SETTLE

The Story of the
United Bank Workers (SORWUC)

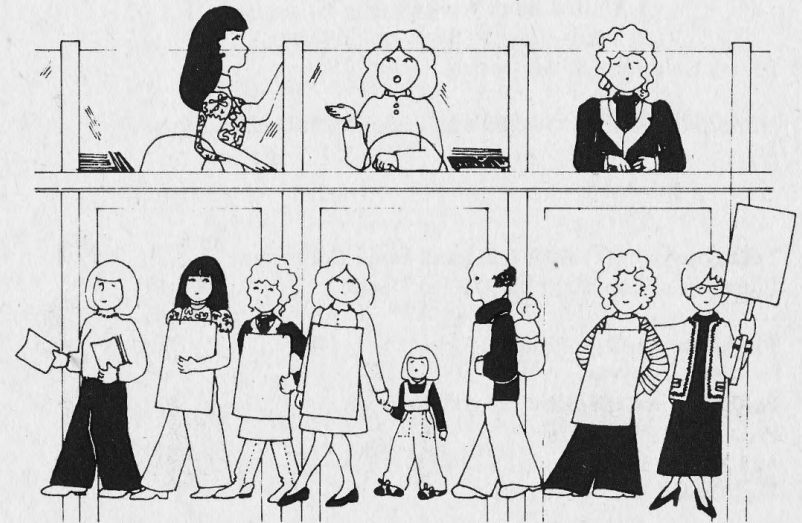


*To the Muckamuck strikers, for their long and inspiring
fight to achieve union recognition in another virtually
unorganized industry—restaurants.*

An Account to Settle

The Story of the
United Bank Workers (SORWUC)

by The Bank Book Collective
Illustrations and Cover by Pat Davitt



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Preface

The Bank Book Collective is: Jackie Ainsworth, Sheree Butt, Charlotte Johnson, Helen Potrebenco, Denise Poupard, Jean Rands, Linda Read, Ulryke Weissgerber, and Dodie Zerr. We are all clerical workers except Denise who is now a scaler. Many people helped us with this book. We would especially like to thank: Melody Rudd, Penny Goldsmith, Mary Schendlinger for typing and typesetting; Honey Maser, Don Stewart, Bernadette Stringer, Linda Field for proofreading; Tony Williams for his research; Susan Margaret and Heather MacNeill for their criticisms and suggestions; Pat Barter, Jean Burgess, Denise Kouri, Lynette Polson for their help with writing; Liza Fry, Laurie McGuigan, Sarah Davidson for their help with editing; Billie Carroll, Anne Hoekema, Carmen Metcalfe, Pat Smith for production; the Euphoniously Feminist and Non-Performing Quintet for help in choosing chapter titles and songs, for their inspirational rewriting of many of the lyrics and for their music on the Gibsons picket line.

In some cases in this book we use a person's real name and in some cases we don't. When we introduce a person and give her surname, that is her real name. If a person is introduced with no surname, we have invented a fictitious name for her. Throughout this book we often refer to the Labour Code and the labour law. When we use those terms, we are usually referring to the federal Canada Labour Code. Bank workers are covered by the federal labour law, though most workers are covered by provincial labour laws. You can obtain a copy of the provincial labour laws by contacting the provincial Department of Labour. Labour Canada, which can give you copies of the federal Labour Code, also has regional offices. If you wish further information about SORWUC contact us at Ste. 1114-207 West Hastings Street, Vancouver B.C. V6B 1H7, 681-2811 or 684-2834.

The Bank Book Collective

*All those jobs so unfulfilling
Will not be done by us unwilling
Need a whole new way of working
Organize, Organize.*

—traditional folk melody

1 Victory Square

Shirley was a teller and a single parent. When she had to work overtime, she was late picking up her child at the day care centre. As the day care workers didn't get paid for overtime either, they weren't too pleased about this situation and pressured Shirley to be on time. So at 5:00 p.m. she walked out instead of filing cheques.

Jackie Ainsworth, a founding member of SORWUC (Service, Office and Retail Workers Union of Canada) is a ledgerkeeper at the Victory Square branch of the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce in downtown Vancouver. She describes that day in the summer of 1976:

As we were putting on our jackets at our lockers, the assistant accountant came and told us that she wanted the cheques filed and that none of us were to leave until they had been filed. It had been a long day, we had had no coffee break, and a couple of tellers were out on their balances. After everyone finally balanced, I was in no mood to start filing and neither was anyone else. Tired and furious, we took off our jackets and headed for the filing cabinets. All except Shirley, who said she'd had it for the day and was leaving. We watched her walk to the front of the branch and sign out in the time book. The assistant accountant ran over to her and seemed to be explaining while Shirley seemed to be arguing. The conversation went on for about five minutes, and then Shirley left. We didn't know if she had quit or had been fired or if they had worked something out.

The following day Shirley was at work and explained that she had been allowed to leave that night but could never do it again. If she had problems with day care arrangements, she had better work them out in some way that allowed her to work involuntary unpaid overtime whenever the bank's needs required it. All the tellers and ledgerkeepers discussed the matter at our wickets and desks. We decided to approach the accountant to say we would share Shirley's overtime so she could leave at 5:00 p.m. The accountant, who was a young and arrogant man and new to the branch, said that was very noble of us but if someone didn't meet the requirements of the job, they should quit. We decided to meet in the pub after work to discuss the matter as it seemed grossly unfair.

At Victory Square we regularly worked overtime. Some of us thought this was because the branch was short-staffed; others thought the tellers were incompetent. If one teller didn't balance, no one could go home until the difference was found. This put incredible pressure on the individual and caused tension among the employees.

With the exception of the head teller all the people on our side of the branch were invited to the meeting at the pub. (Tellers, ledgerkeepers and steno are on one side of the branch; the managers, accountant, loans officer and two secretaries on the other.) Six women attended and two others who supported the idea were unable to come. The first thing we discussed was the exclusion of the head teller. Although she was not a supervisor, the tellers thought of her as a sort of supervisor who might fink to management. The fact that the secretaries weren't invited wasn't even discussed. (In later months the head teller and one of the secretaries were to become active union members and the head teller was elected the first representative of the branch to the union executive.)

Overtime wasn't the only complaint we discussed. The tellers resented the arbitrary power of the supervisors. We were angry about what we saw as personal favouritism towards certain staff members and petty harassment of others. Supervisors had the power to recommend promotion and transfer based on their personal likes and dislikes with no regard to seniority. New tellers were not given adequate training and then were blamed by management and even their co-workers when they failed to balance. When annual cost of living increases were announced, we discovered that the new teller who had no previous banking experience was making more money than our head teller who had worked there for one and a half years.

The main purpose of our meeting was to discuss what we could do to make Regional Office aware of our dissatisfaction. The tellers suggested walking out en masse the following Friday during the peak time in the branch. The ledgers department argued against this action, saying the only result would be that everyone would get fired and replaced by women from the Regional Training Centre which was only three blocks away. There was discussion of a petition to the Regional Office. This idea was rejected on the grounds that it would just end up in someone's wastepaper basket after the names on it were noted. The idea of going to the branch manager was also rejected on the grounds that the manager had no power to act on complaints involving low wages, discrepancies in wages, short staffing and the lack of available training. These are all determined by Regional Office.

I raised the issue of union organizing. Everyone at the meeting thought a union was just what we needed; that a union in the banks would solve many of the problems. However, it seemed then to be a crazy, impossible idea.

The total assets of the Canadian chartered banks in 1976 were \$119,944,425,000. There were 7,113 bank branches in Canada of which 836 were in B.C. They employed 130,111 people.

We were just six people in one branch in Vancouver. The bank was so big and powerful there seemed to be no way to make ourselves heard.

A union was a nice dream, but what could we do that was practical? The meeting ended after a couple of hours with everyone very discouraged.

SORWUC had already signed up a few members in banks as a result of leafletting downtown office buildings. When I started working at Victory Square, we in SORWUC had hoped that in a year or so we could get together an organizing committee in the banks. But this first meeting took place after I had been there barely three months.

The day Shirley walked out, I had called the SORWUC office. The next morning, a leaflet about overtime was handed to employees as we went to work by two SORWUC members who worked as volunteers in the union office. The leaflet said that the issue of overtime, overtime pay and the right to refuse to work overtime could be dealt with effectively only with a union contract. It gave the phone number of the SORWUC office and asked people to call for further information. The Toronto-Dominion Bank across the street was also leafletted so that it wouldn't be too conspicuous that we were singling out the Commerce Victory Square branch.

The leaflet resulted in a discussion among tellers about our wages and how disgustingly low they were. At the time (1976) the starting rate was about \$600 a month in Vancouver while outside Vancouver it was as low as \$525. There seemed to be no rational system for determining the annual merit increases beyond who liked you in the branch. We also talked about the lack of pay for overtime. (The banks had a special exemption from the law that workers must be paid for working overtime. By means of an arrangement with the Ministry of Finance, overtime in banks was "averaged". If one night everyone worked late and another night they were sent home early, the two were considered to cancel each other out, and no overtime was paid. The Banks were allowed to average overtime over a thirteen week period so that employees could be required to work overtime every day for several weeks without pay.)

The discussion continued over the next four or five weeks. Dodie Zerr, the current accounts ledgerkeeper, Karen, the head teller, and I became good friends, and committed to the idea of organizing a union in the banks. We got together almost every night after work. I told everyone about SORWUC; why and how it was formed. We talked about "good" and "bad" unions, about the laws that govern unions, how to apply for certification and, of course, who we should approach to join the union at the Victory Square branch. The three of us and Shirley went to a meeting of SORWUC Local 1 on July 22, 1976.

There were about thirty people at the meeting, mostly women. The meeting was in a member's house. The union office was in her basement and was staffed by volunteer labour — there were no paid officers. The office had a typewriter, SORWUC's first capital expense, purchased in January 1976, and a mimeograph machine which had been donated.

Most of the people at the meeting were not working in places where SORWUC had contracts, but were "members at large", committed to the idea of a working women's union. We discussed the appeal to the Unemployment Insurance Commission about a SORWUC

member being cut off maternity benefits and denied regular benefits.

The meeting decided to hold a mail vote of all members on whether or not to affiliate to the B.C. Federation of Women, an umbrella organization of women's groups. At that time, the union was a grass-roots, women-oriented union (and that's pretty much what we remain today). SORWUC's origins are in the Working Women's Association (WWA) which in 1971 and 1972 was active in supporting strikes of women in predominantly unorganized industries struggling to achieve union recognition. The WWA had done informational leafletting about UIC, equal pay, day care, job security, as well as the federal and provincial labour laws. Members of WWA were involved in union drives at Smitty's Pancake House, Pizza Patio, Denny's and the University of B.C. It was apparent that the existing unions were not prepared to undertake the kind of fight that would be required to organize unorganized industries. They saw banks, restaurants and offices as unorganizable.

The WWA had finally decided what was needed was a union whose main objective was to organize the unorganized. And so SORWUC was formed in October 1972. We didn't want a union run by highly-paid professional union leaders. So the constitution included: referendum election of all officers; referendum ballots for any dues increase; a limit on the length of time any member could hold a paid position in the union; and a provision that the salary for such a position would be no greater than the highest wage in a SORWUC contract. Locals of the union were given complete control of their own affairs and the right to secede from SORWUC upon majority vote of the local membership. The new union encouraged members in each workplace to write their own contract proposals and conduct their own negotiations for a union contract.

During a break in the meeting, one of the bank workers said that she had never attended a "women's liberation" meeting before.

The meeting heard reports on the workplaces which were organized by SORWUC — four day care centres, five social service units, one legal office, one student society office and a tuxedo rental store. All but two of these were in the public sector. Negotiating wage increases for public service employees is difficult. For instance, day care workers' contracts were negotiated with non-profit societies composed of parents, many of whom were single mothers working for equally low wages in offices or banks. In July 1976 SORWUC members were preparing to go on strike against a private sector employer, Mallabar Tuxedo Rentals Ltd.

The meeting decided to rent office space downtown, choosing the Dominion Building near Victory Square because of low rent and convenient location. We discussed the leafletting campaign that had been going on for several months. SORWUC leaflets were distributed at major office centres and banks in downtown Vancouver. The leaflets discussed wages and working conditions of clerical workers and stressed the need for unionization to overcome these inequities. That spring the union had held a series of noon hour information meetings at the downtown library.

Although the main branch of the Commerce had been leafletted and a few workers there joined SORWUC, we four Victory Square bank workers were the first to attend a meeting. At this July meeting Dodie, Karen and Shirley joined the union, and we were all authorized to sign up other bank workers.

The Canada Labour Code, which is the labour law covering banks and bank workers, would require the banks to recognize our union and negotiate with us once we were "certified". The Canada Labour Relations Board (CLRB) is the body appointed by the federal Cabinet to administer the Labour Code. The Board decides whether or not a union will be certified. When the union applies for certification, we have to say what "bargaining unit" we are applying for and demonstrate that we have a majority. The bargaining unit is all the people who will be covered by the union contract once it is signed, whether they are union members or not. Like porridge and chairs, bargaining units are supposed to be neither too hot nor too cold nor too large nor too small. The bigger the bargaining unit, the more bargaining power the union will have. However, in order to get certified, the union has to have the support of the majority of the bargaining unit and increasing the size of that unit could make that more difficult. The union can express an opinion about what the bargaining unit should be, but it is the Labour Relations Board that decides.

At this time there were several myths about a union in the banks, the most common of which was that the bargaining unit had to be "The Nation". This would mean that to organize a bank we would have to sign up a majority of all the employees of that bank across the country before we could be certified. This, of course, would make organizing impossible and contradict the labour law which states that bank workers in Canada have the right to join a union of their choice.

In 1959, the Canada Labour Relations Board had rejected an application for certification for a small bank branch in Kitimat, B.C. The Board ruled that this branch was not an appropriate bargaining unit, but went on to say: "This decision must not be taken as indicating that the Board agrees with the respondent's (bank's) contention that the appropriate unit must be a nation-wide unit of employees of the Bank. . . It may well be that units of some of the employees of a bank, grouped together territorially or on some other basis, will prove to be appropriate, rather than a nation-wide unit." For the next seventeen years this decision would be used by unions as well as the banks as evidence of the impossibility of organizing banks.

In spite of all this, we decided to go ahead and apply for certification for our branch, Victory Square. There was no other way to start the campaign. We then had to decide which jobs in our branch should be included in the bargaining unit, and which should be excluded because they were management rather than workers. We decided to try to include everyone except the manager, the assistant manager and the accountant. The final decision would be made by the Board.

We divided up the list of Victory Square employees and each of us took on the task of approaching a certain number of individuals. By the

second week in August, nine out of twenty employees at Victory Square had joined the union. We were nervous about approaching people who we thought might tell management. Finally we decided to apply for certification on Monday, August 16 whether we had a majority or not. Applying for certification simply involves filling out a form provided by the CLRB and sending it to them for investigation. The information required on this form includes the name and address of the employer and the union, a description of the bargaining unit for which the union is applying, the total number of employees in the unit, and the number of union members. The Canada Labour Code states that a union may apply for certification with thirty-five per cent or more of the employees signed up. If the union's membership is more than thirty-five per cent but less than a majority, a vote is taken to determine the wishes of all employees. If more than fifty per cent join the union, no vote is necessary.

WORKERS IN THE MONEY MARKET (1973): WHERE ARE THE WOMEN?*			
TYPE OF WORK	No. of MEN	No. of WOMEN	PERCENT BY SEX
EXECUTIVE & MANAGERIAL	9,765 ♂		♂♂♂♂♂♂♂♂♂♂ 96.1% ♂
		397 ♀	♀ 3.9% ♀
SUPERVISORY	18,501 ♂		♂♂♂♂♂♂♂♂♂♂ 82.7% ♂
		7,711 ♀	♀♀ 17.3% ♀
CLERICAL & RELATED**	17,389 ♂		♂♂ 16.1% ♂
		90,403 ♀	♀♀♀♀♀♀♀♀♀♀♀♀♀♀♀♀ 83.9% ♀
MAINTENANCE & SERVICE	2,661 ♂		♂♂♂♂♂♂♂♂♂♂ 71.8% ♂
		1,045 ♀	♀♀♀♀ 28.2% ♀
SALESMEN & AGENTS	2,847 ♂		♂♂♂♂♂♂♂♂♂♂ 84.6% ♂
		520 ♀	♀♀ 15.4% ♀
TOTALS	♂ 51,163	♀ 100,157	151,319 PEOPLE EMPLOYED 66.2% ♀

* Source: "Total Employed, Banks and Other Accepting Establishments, by Type of Work, and Sex", *Statistics Canada*, 72-603, October 1973 (latest available).

** 'Clerical and Related' is defined as follows: "This group includes occupations concerned with recording, transcribing, typing, composing correspondence, classifying and filing, organizing and recording data into accounts and quantitative records, paying and receiving money, operating office machines and electronic data processing equipment, performing other minor administrative and general clerical duties. Examples in this category are: Clerk, Typist, Stenographer, Secretary, Account Clerk, Audit Clerk, Book-keeper, Payroll Clerk, Bank Cashier, Bank Teller, Annuity Record Clerk, Claims Calculator, Securities Clerk, Statistical Clerk, Office Machine Operator, Adjusters, etc."

That weekend we made a last-ditch effort to sign up a majority. Although it was recognized that "outsiders" would be less effective in signing people up than would employees of the branch, it was thought necessary to try to protect the union activists in the branch. SORWUC members who were not employees at Victory Square phoned or visited three of the people we were hesitant about. None of the three joined.

We had decided to apply with less than fifty per cent just to get the thing started. We thought that after we applied and were able to come out in the open and argue with people, we could convince others to join. Also, some of the employees wanted to apply for union certification just to show Head Office how upset we were. Even if we lost, at least our protest would be registered.

The application for certification went in when the doors of the Vancouver office of the CLRB opened on Monday, August 16. The usual procedure is that the CLRB notifies the employer by mail that such an application has been made. But we thought someone might have told management what was going on, so we decided to officially tell them ourselves. This was to prevent the bank from firing union activists on some pretext at a time when the bank could pretend it knew nothing of the union application. The Canada Labour Code makes it illegal to fire people for union activity but they can be fired for any other reason, or even no reason at all, as long as it's not for union activity.

At 10:00 a.m. Jean Rands, Local 1 Vice-President, and Melody Rudd, Provincial Secretary-Treasurer of the Association of University and College Employees (AUCE), a sister union, came to the branch and asked to see the manager. They were told the manager was on vacation and the assistant manager was in a meeting with a customer which would be quite a while and that he then had to leave for another appointment. Jean and Melody said they would wait.

The "customer" in to see the assistant manager was the regional general manager of the B.C./Yukon Region. He had arrived at the branch at 9:00 a.m. and we had all been individually introduced. He said he was making one of his "regular" branch visits although none of us had ever seen him before.

After Jean and Melody had waited a while, the assistant manager came out of his office to see them. Jean handed him a copy of the application with the CLRB "received" stamp on it and told him that SORWUC had applied for certification on behalf of the employees at the branch. The assistant manager nervously said he didn't know what to do or say, to which Melody replied, "I think congratulations are in order." Then Jean and Melody left.

There was little work done in the branch the rest of the day. The regional general manager left. The union people were very quiet. When asked about the application, we said we didn't know anything about it. The manager arrived at noon, having been called back from vacation.

SORWUC held a press conference at our union office (located across the street from Victory Square) to announce the application.

Our National President, Elizabeth Godley, described it to the press as a "historic application". By mid afternoon, there were TV cameras at the branch and reporters asking for the bank's comments. That afternoon and in the following days, we received phone calls and several telegrams at Victory Square from other bank employees congratulating us. A few data centre employees included notes of support and congratulations among the cheques that were sent to the branch each morning.

The same day as the application was filed, two women arrived from the Regional Office. We were told they had come to help us with our problem of short staffing. I recognized one of the women as Dorothy Hooper, the personnel officer at Regional Office who had interviewed and hired me. Others remembered Bonnie Wong from the Methods and Organization Department. She had spent some time in the branch doing an efficiency study for Regional Office — timing people's work and rearranging their desks. These two became the main leaders in the campaign against the union. They questioned individuals about their union involvement and organized anti-union meetings.

Mary, the steno, was at home sick after hurting her finger in the addressograph machine at work. One evening she received a call from Bonnie Wong. Wong said there had been a staff meeting at work that day, during which the union members in the branch had identified themselves and claimed Mary as one of them. Mary agreed that she had joined the union. There had been a staff meeting, but no one had claimed their union membership. Mary's admission was the first evidence the bank had that she had joined.

This phone call was followed by a visit the next day. Mary called me at the branch at 11:00 a.m. to say that Sharon, Mary's supervisor, and Bonnie Wong were on their way to visit her at home with a letter they wanted her to sign resigning from the union. Mary wanted another union member to be there when they arrived. I called the union office and it was decided that Jean would go to Mary's house. When Jean arrived, she and Mary decided it would be better for Jean to wait in the kitchen and take notes, while Mary argued and tried to get the letter from them. Since they were making this visit on company time, it seemed obvious they had the manager's permission. We were convinced they were violating the Labour Code where it says no employer or representative of the employer shall "seek, by intimidation, threat of dismissal or any other kind of threat, by the imposition of a pecuniary or other penalty or by any other means, to compel a person to refrain from becoming or cease to be a member, officer or representative of a trade union. . ."

We felt that by getting evidence together about their visit with Mary, we would have grounds to lay a complaint of unfair labour practice with the CLRB. The Board would then order the bank to stop harassing and intimidating employees, and let the bank know that no attention would be paid to letters extracted from employees in this way.

During the visit, Wong told Mary that because she was a union

member she was "labelled". She said that if Mary tried to get a job in another bank or office her chances would be pretty poor. She said "Orientals are known as good workers. That is why the bank hires us and has treated us so well. We do not want to spoil it." She told Mary her objective was "to smash the union". She asked Mary to sign a letter of withdrawal from the union. She would not give Mary the actual letter although Mary kept trying to grab it from her.

At the end of the meeting, Jean confronted Sharon and Bonnie, saying that what they had done was an unfair labour practice and that we intended to take the matter to the CLRB. Bonnie and Sharon arrived back at the branch, charging the union with "foul and dirty" tactics.

The harassment of Mary continued on a personal level until she withdrew her unfair labour practice complaint and eventually quit her job. Although we argued we still had grounds for complaint as a union, the case was never heard by the CLRB.

The anti-union employees went on to form a group called BIG — Bankers Independent Group — and started to get in touch with supervisors in other branches where the union was active.

*Nicolia May found a book called "Organize"
And she understood every word to her surprise
So with an old sail and a novice crew
They made a great big wave on the ocean blue
— Nicolia by Holly Near*

2 A Great Big Wave

While the banks were getting their anti-union act together, we were going crazy at the union office. Employees from branches all over B.C. were calling for information and many wanted to join. In the first six weeks after the Victory Square application, we applied for ten more branches. These branches were: Bank of Montreal at Edmonds and Kingsway, Cloverdale, Langley and Ganges; Commerce at Ocean Park, Port Hardy and Ganges; and the Bank of Nova Scotia at Simon Fraser University (SFU), Vancouver Heights and Haney. Karen, Dodie and Jackie from Victory Square, several Local 1 members, and Melody would go in pairs to meetings set up by branch employees and talk to them about the union, explaining why we had joined and why it was important for them to join with us to build a union strong enough to take on the banks.

Melody and Dodie went to Salt Spring Island and signed up a majority in all of the banks on the Gulf Islands (the two branches in Ganges). We talked by phone to employees of the Port Hardy branch and mailed applications to them. Most branches, however, were signed up at meetings in employees' homes. These meetings usually involved a majority of the employees in the branch. Sometimes supervisors were adamantly opposed to the union and sometimes they called the union meetings and were the first to join. The loans officers were the hardest to convince as they were usually men who expected to get promoted to branch manager some day.

The average size of a branch is approximately twelve people (including two management positions). Banks have an incredible hierarchical structure. In such a branch it would not be surprising to find four tellers (one a head teller), two ledger clerks, an assistant accountant (who supervises the teller and ledger departments), a secretary, a loans clerk, a loans officer, an accountant (who supervises the secretary, the loans clerk and the loans officer), and a manager.

At the organizing meetings we always spent a long time discussing who should be in the bargaining unit and who we wanted excluded. Again, it was all guess work since the Board would not only decide whether the branch was an appropriate unit, they would also rule on this whole inclusion/exclusion question. We could make some educated guesses. We and the banks would agree on excluding the manager and the accountant who generally acts as personnel manager in the branch. They both hire and fire employees and therefore should not be in the union. However, we suspected the banks would also want to exclude

the branch secretary because of the supposedly confidential nature of her work, and the loans officers and management trainees as they supposedly performed management functions. The banks later made the expected arguments in regard to these positions; each bank also argued for the exclusion of all part-time employees.

In our first meetings it was difficult for us to separate the individual from the position. If the secretary was anti-union, branch employees would want the secretarial position excluded. Or if, by excluding the part-time employees, the union then had a majority, some people would want to exclude part-timers from the union! Secretaries and part-time workers were skilled and valuable employees who were often among the poorest paid and most in need of union protection. We ended up feeling very strongly about their inclusion.

Although as individuals the loans officers were mostly anti-union, this position was one to which women were generally denied access, and we wanted it to come under the seniority terms in a collective agreement. Assistant accountants performed supervisory functions and were sometimes seen as management, but in fact they mostly did their own work, and did not have the power to hire or fire employees. We were ambivalent about management trainees. In addition to doing our regular work, we had to train the trainees who were usually young men. We resented the fact that we could wait ten years for a promotion while they could be loans officers within a few months. While they were training for management, they were supposedly doing the same work as we were. We wanted those trainee positions to be subject to the seniority provisions in the contract so that clerical workers would have access to training programs. In larger branches, we agreed that assistant managers should be excluded, but we argued that loans officers, assistant accountants and management trainees should be included in the unit. It seemed that in terms of bargaining power, the more employees included in the unit the better. If it was necessary to take strike action, we didn't want the banks to be able to run a branch without the union people.

When people asked us to meet with their branch, we encouraged them to invite as many co-workers as possible. If someone was left out it could be used as an argument that the union was secretive and sneaky. On the other hand, sometimes when supervisors came, people were afraid to join the union or to speak up about the conditions in their branch. Our objective was that all the arguments for and against should be out in the open so people could make an informed decision.

The issues at these meetings were generally the same. Wages were always at the top of the list, seniority next, then deductions for cash shortages, vacations, sick leave, overtime, training management trainees, overcrowding, shortstaffing and others.

Some of the arguments against the union at these meetings were: you people are crazy, there's no way you can do this; banks are so powerful they run the government, how can you hope to win; we already have great benefits; we'll be ordered out on strike; I've already got enough people bossing me around; and others. We answered that

the Labour Code specifically says bank workers can unionize; that a union of bank workers would be one of the biggest unions in the country; that we were organizing ourselves democratically; that no branch could strike unless members in that branch voted to strike; and that the only way to have any say in our working conditions was through the union. But the most effective answers came from branch employees who told us of injustices they had suffered or witnessed. They compared their pay to the wages of husbands and friends who were union members.

Our strategy at this time was to get as many applications as possible before the CLRB. We wanted to prove that Victory Square was not an isolated incident; that bank workers all over B.C. wanted a ruling on their right to have a union. Although it was best to apply with a majority of branch employees, we often applied with less. We needed as many applications as possible before the Board called the hearings.

After the first application, bank workers from all over B.C. joined the union. Among these were the employees of the Port McNeill branch of the Commerce. Denise Poupard, one of these employees, tells the story:

In July 1976, I was hired by the Commerce in Port McNeill (at the northern end of Vancouver Island). I was new to the village and unaware of the bank's reputation as a poor place to work. I was shocked when friends advised me to turn down the job and wait until something—anything else—turned up. They were right.

The branch was in rough shape that summer. There had been three complete turnovers in the teller line in six months. The two tellers had been given only one day's training on cash when they were hired and the next day were the only tellers at the branch. As the posting machine was broken, every day the accountant and the ledgerkeeper travelled forty-five kilometres to use the machine at the Commerce branch in Port Hardy. On the floor were boxes of filing that had never been done. Days were long, overtime "averaged out" (i.e. unpaid), balancing a miracle, and coffee breaks non-existent. I was lucky—a few months earlier when the branch had been "the only bank in town" and customers lined up outside every Friday, things had been even worse.

In August 1976, we heard about a Commerce branch in Vancouver joining a union. Within a week, we were given a half hour coffee break Tuesday through Thursday at 9 a.m. (We started work at 8:30.) Because our branch was so small, we went across the street to the restaurant for the break. It was there that somebody casually mentioned the union branch in Vancouver. The management trainee who was with us became quite upset and said anybody who joined a union would lose their job and that on his previous job, union dues were so high that he could hardly live on the few dollars that were left of his paycheque. While most of our group felt they could not risk losing their jobs, a couple of us argued with the trainee as we knew he was using fabricated anti-union scare tactics. But the threat of job loss, no matter how exaggerated, is a serious matter, so the subject was dropped.

By November we had become pretty sick of listening to ourselves complain. Day after day we spent our coffee breaks telling each other about the rotten pay; the supervisors who continually harassed and insulted us; the hours and the conditions. Finally one woman said: "I've got half a mind to join the union." The trainee, who had told management of our earlier discussion and tailed us to coffee ever since, was not there that day. Tired of our hopeless whining, I said: "Let's not just talk, let's do it." Nobody had to convince anybody else. One of us contacted a woman from the Commerce in Port Hardy which had joined the union shortly before. Some of those women came to Port McNeill for a clandestine meeting. It felt so good to realize that although each branch had unique conditions, we were all saying basically the same thing: underpaid, overworked, no security, no bargaining power, and mad enough to try to force a change.

Shortly after, we held another meeting among ourselves to reach a final decision. Advised to be wary of management finding out about our talk before a majority had joined and our union application was announced, we only discussed unionization with people we were sure of. We were probably angry enough to join any union but we joined SORWUC, impressed by what the Port Hardy women had told us about the union's philosophies. It was a lucky choice and a good one.

A few days after we announced our application for certification, our accountant told three members during coffee break that they would be asked to sign a paper saying that they had been coerced into joining the union. He was told in unprintable words what they thought of that idea. They stuck by their decision.

The biggest risk was taken by our steno, a single mother with three young children. In an isolated boom town where rent and food prices were based on loggers' union wages, her wage was so low that welfare was subsidizing her income. One of the richest corporations in Canada was not paying an employee enough for her and her family to survive! Embarrassed by public knowledge of the situation, branch management obtained a raise that would eliminate her welfare subsidy but which, after deductions, left her total income smaller than before. By joining a union she had everything to gain but she could not afford to lose what little she had in the process. Nevertheless, she did what was right and necessary.

I was so shocked by her treatment that it became a simple matter of wrong and right. The present situation was unequivocally wrong—going against everything I believed was just. So when it came time to join the union, there was no decision to be made. I did what was right and necessary.

*We've got to go out and build our union
We've got to build it for ourselves
There ain't nobody going to build it for us
We've got to go out and build our union for ourselves.*
— Additional verse to Woody Guthrie's "You've Gotta
go Down and Join the Union"

3 Our Own Local

Within a month of the first application, 104 bank workers joined the union. We were signing bank workers into the union on the basis that it was a democratic union and bank workers would control our own executive, finances and negotiations. We were anxious to form our own local as soon as possible. Those were times of euphoria and exhilaration. We couldn't lose.

On September 26, 1976, the Bank Employees' Organizing Committee asked for and received a charter from the SORWUC National Executive and thereby became the United Bank Workers, Local 2, SORWUC. Our founding meeting was held at the Fishermen's Hall in Vancouver and was attended by thirty bank workers. We elected our first executive: President, Dodie Zerr from Victory Square; Vice-President, Charlotte Johnson from the Commerce Data Center; Secretary, Jackie Ainsworth from Victory Square; Treasurer, Maureen Pearson from the Scotia at SFU; Trustees, Eileen Sprout from the Vancouver Heights Scotia and Barb Dyer, Bank of Montreal, Cloverdale.

In the next few months, we worked on building our local. We set times and places for executive meetings and membership meetings, made provisions for collecting dues, and coordinated our sign-up campaign. We made decisions about what expenses we would be responsible for and what the National Executive should pay, how much our petty cash should be, how much letterhead we should order, what leaflets we needed and who should write them. We established procedures for signing cheques and paying bills. We divided up among ourselves all this work plus: talking to the CLRB investigating officers, signing up our co-workers, talking to the press, meeting with other unions, meeting with our lawyers. And of course, we were all working at the bank. If we weren't at meetings, we were on the phone—talking to bank workers and arranging meetings. It was all really exciting and although relationships at home were suffering, we were building important new ones and we were finally taking on the banks.

UBW Executive members met with other trade unionists to discuss our organizing drive. Some were friendly; others were respectful or hostile or patronizing or wary or excited. To some, the fact that we were not affiliated to the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) meant a great deal; others didn't seem to care. (The CLC is a national federation of unions—U.S. based trade unions and Canadian public and government employees' unions.) Charlotte Johnson worked the evening shift at the data centre so she often met with trade union leaders during the days

and then someone else would speak at union meetings in the evenings.

There were meetings every night of the week, often two in one evening, and there was always the lunch hour when a short meeting could be squeezed in. Not everyone could make it to our meetings and so much was happening that we decided to put out a regular newsletter. It was called "The Monthly Statement."

The CLRB investigating officers arranged to meet us after work when we could go over the various applications, state our position regarding inclusion/exclusion issues, and discuss the procedure for the Board hearings on the bargaining unit question. There were zillions of forms to type for each application for certification.

The investigating officers had been assigned by the Board to inspect the membership forms, to come down to our office to photocopy our membership records for each branch, and photocopy our deposit books proving payment of initiation fees and membership dues. It was important that each person paid the membership fee themselves out of their own money. This, to the Board, proved the person did indeed wish to be represented by the union. The Board assigned one investigating officer for each bank. Once an application went in, the officer assigned to this bank sent us a copy of the reports which the bank had submitted regarding the number of employees in the branch, their positions, the organizational structure and hierarchy, and which positions the bank wanted excluded from the bargaining unit. A bank worker from the branch would come down to the office after work to meet with the officer and verify that the bank's information was correct.

In response to each application, each bank wrote a letter to the Board saying they contested the application on the grounds that one bank branch was not an appropriate bargaining unit. They further stated that in their view, SORWUC should have to prove it was a proper union as defined by the Canadian Labour Code. They argued that loans officers, manager's secretaries, management trainees, and/or part-time employees should be excluded. The banks had the gall to say that part-time employees should not be allowed to join the union because they were not entitled to any bank benefits and therefore had no interest in improving the benefits. We had to answer each of these arguments for each branch we applied for.

There was an awful lot of legal work to be done. The basic rules about organizing banks had not yet been established. SORWUC would be setting legal precedents on questions like: Can banks be organized branch by branch, or must employees of a whole region join the union before it can be recognized? Are loans officers and managers' secretaries employees under the Code and entitled to join the union? How far can management go in persuading employees not to join the union?

SORWUC was for the first time organizing in an industry falling under federal jurisdiction. Unlike most industries, banks, shipping companies, railways, airlines, radio stations and some other transportation and communication enterprises are covered by federal labour legi-

slation. Although SORWUC was already officially recognized by the B.C. Labour Relations Board, we had to prove that we were "a trade union in the meaning of the Act" to the satisfaction of the Canada Labour Relations Board.

At first, we met with Harry Rankin, our lawyer, in the early mornings, on our way to work. When we realized that establishing bank workers' legal right to organize would involve a great deal of legal research and several days of hearings before the CLRB, we were turned over to Ian Donald, a partner in Rankin's firm. We met with Ian after work, on our lunch hours and on weekends.

In the past, although SORWUC had sought advice from lawyers, we had always represented ourselves at the B.C. Labour Relations Board. We didn't feel we could do that with the bank campaign. We were told that the Canada Labour Relations Board was more formal and legalistic than the B.C. Board, and that the banks were likely to appeal Board decisions to the Courts, which made it more important to have everything legally and technically correct. We didn't want to take the chance of losing on some technicality and jeopardizing the jobs of UBW members and the whole organizing campaign. As well, we didn't have time to meet with all the bank workers who wanted to meet with us, and there was no way we wanted to spend our evenings in the law library when we could be organizing more branches. So we began running up a legal bill.

We were communicating by phone and mail with the Canadian Union of Bank Employees (CUBE), another independent union which had applied for four bank branches in southern Ontario around the same time that we applied for Victory Square. They received help in their organizing efforts from the Canadian Chemical Workers Union, a breakaway group from the International Chemical Workers Union. We were thrilled to learn that bank workers in other areas of Canada were also organizing. They faced the same problems we did, and we shared experiences and information as much as we could.

We had signed up seventeen branches by February 3, 1977. Half were in or near Vancouver and the others were mostly on Vancouver Island. At this point it was hard to keep up with the requests for information from bank workers. There were volunteers from Local 1 working in the office on a regular basis, but we decided we needed a full-time office person to work solely for the UBW. Although it would have been best to elect a UBW member to this position, leaves of absence are virtually unheard of in the banks and no one wanted to quit their job at this point. Heather MacNeill, who had been involved in the AUCE organizing drive, agreed to work for us. Her first job had been as a teller at the Royal Bank so she was anxious to be involved in a union drive that was taking on one of her worst employers. UBW members voted in a referendum ballot to hire Heather at \$700 per month for six months, and then review the position. AUCE donated \$200 per month towards the salary, and we had to raise the other \$500. It was a terrible wage but it was more than the starting wage in the banks. In February 1977

Heather became the first person ever to be paid a salary by SORWUC.

Also in February 1977 SORWUC held a national convention. At the beginning, we bank workers were nervous about attending our first union convention. Many UBW members met members of Local 1 for the first time, and heard reports about Electrical Trades Credit Union negotiations, the strike at Mallabar Tuxedo Rentals, the attempt to organize Lifestream Health Food Store, our certification at Bimini Neighbourhood Pub and our application for three outlets of Church's Chicken.

It was exciting to get the whole union together and discover how much we had in common with waitresses who were organizing into Local 1. The fight at Bimini sounded just like what we were up against in the banks. The day after the workers applied for certification, almost everyone withdrew from the union. There was serious division between the women waitresses and the men bartenders. Local 1 had been certified at Bimini and was trying to rebuild union support and prepare for negotiations. We reported to the convention on the formation and growth of the United Bank Workers, Local 2.

The convention passed constitutional amendments and resolutions to solve a technical problem. Bank workers had been joining as members of the National Union when, according to the constitution, we should have been joining Local 2. We expected the banks to use this against us in the hearings.

At this convention, we elected Jean Rands as National President and Elizabeth Godley as National Secretary. Elizabeth took on the responsibility of coordinating the requests for information coming from bank workers outside the Lower Mainland. She coordinated the leaflet drives and meetings in different parts of the province. Elizabeth, Melody and Heather travelled to the Island, the Interior and the Sechelt Peninsula to meet with people. We rented more office space in the Dominion Building and were always bringing in more desks for people to work at. Two more phones were added, and almost monthly we were reorganizing tasks and assignments. The work piled up.

The UBW set up a grievance committee to work on individual complaints. One problem was the banks' practice of deducting money from the tellers' wages when they were short in their cash. At the Scotia, if you were short more than \$2 it was necessary that the supervisor count your cash. This was time-consuming and had to be done at the end of the day when people were tired and anxious to get home. So if you were out \$2.75, it was not unheard of to slip 75 cents out of your own purse and throw it into your cash in order to avoid a cash count. Quite a set up—the bank had us throwing in our two bits here and there to add to their million dollar profits. Any cash overage was put into a special account at the branch and eventually sent to the Bank of Canada.

If a teller was short more than \$2, she had to make up the difference to a maximum of \$10. For anything over \$10, the teller paid a percentage (generally 10%). The Scotia took \$5 a month out of the employee's personal account until the "debt" was paid. This outrageous practice resulted in one teller having her rent cheque bounce. She went

on vacation and had left just enough money in her account to cover her rent when the bank put through a \$5 debit and her rent cheque was returned NSF. This happened before the union had applied for her branch. The "Monthly Statement" announced that the next time the bank deducted any money from a teller who was a union member, the union would take the case to small claims court. We released our newsletter article to the press. Within two months, each bank announced to all their employees that there would be no further deductions for cash shortages. Although we didn't have a collective agreement and weren't even certified, the fact that we were working together and speaking out as one already meant we had some power.

The grievance committee challenged the banks' use of lie detector tests. We were approached by bank employees who had been subjected to these tests as part of management's investigations of shortages. Although the banks claimed the tests were voluntary, the employees felt their jobs were on the line. We researched and publicized studies which showed the tests were unreliable and intimidating, and American laws which prohibited the use of lie detector tests in employment relationships. We wrote to the Minister of Labour demanding that protective legislation be passed. Again, we released our letter to the press. The Civil Liberties Association of B.C. helped us on this issue.

We were always fighting the myth that it was impossible to organize the banks. In the media blitz following our first application, Opal Skilling, Secretary of Local 15 of the international Office and Technical Employees' Union (OTEU), said SORWUC was bound to fail because in order to apply for an individual branch, it was necessary to change the Bank Act. No wonder bank workers were confused!

Most people thought that the banks were just too big and powerful to be organized (even many who joined the union essentially did so as a protest). Often these feelings were expressed in terms of money of which the banks had unlimited amounts. They would have the best lawyers, negotiators, public relations men, all working against us. Whereas we were just a bunch of women with no strike fund, and very little in the way of dues income. We argued that a bank workers' union would have 120,000 members and would be one of the biggest and most powerful unions in the country. If bank workers wanted a union, lack of money couldn't stop us. Then we set out to prove that that was true.

Most of our organizing work was inexpensive. Our meetings with other bank workers in the Lower Mainland cost nothing. Hundreds of volunteers stood outside bank branches handing out leaflets. We worked hard on press releases and we never bought advertising. Mimeographing, folding, stapling, and mailing were all done by volunteer labour.

Nevertheless, we were soon up to our necks in new expenses: the office space we needed to accommodate volunteers working on the campaign; the two new phones; travelling expenses and long distance calls to sign up distant branches and then keep in touch; tons of paper for newsletters and leaflets; hundreds of dollars in postage each month;

legal expenses and the salary for our one paid union organizer.

We knew it would be a while before we had enough dues coming in from bank workers to cover the salary, rent and phone bills. In fact, our dues covered less than 10% of our expenses. There were two ways of dealing with the continual financial crisis—cutting costs and fund-raising.

We couldn't cut costs where it would defeat our objectives. For instance, we had to pay travelling expenses for out-of-town members to come to meetings because we couldn't build a democratic organization of bank workers any other way. It was difficult for them to use cheap methods of travel because they didn't have enough time. Sometimes, bank workers paid their own way. Sometimes they were able to raise money in their own community.

Volunteers who travelled for the union used the cheapest possible methods—cars, buses, boats, even hitchhiking. (Sometimes we found new organizing possibilities by talking to people we met on buses or while hitchhiking.) But again we faced the same problem as with legal stuff—we didn't want to be spending our time on a bus when we could be signing up more branches.

We rarely spent money on hotels. Staying with other union members or supporters not only saved money but provided opportunities for informal discussion about the union, and the development of new friendships. A UBW organizer on the road would establish a temporary office in some downtown restaurant with a pay phone, stopping there to do paper work and make calls between leafletting, meeting bank workers at noon and after work, doing media interviews and meeting with local union leaders.

We printed tens of thousands of leaflets very cheaply thanks to Press Gang, a women's press in Vancouver. Our letters and newsletters were mailed by volunteer labour.

In spite of all our attempts to save, the two year campaign cost about \$85,000. While this was not much money, it seemed a lot to us and fund-raising was a major activity of the union.

We tried to do fund-raising in such a way that it built the campaign generally. Support from other unions would be crucial to bank workers when it came to negotiating and taking job action, as well as in the initial organizing stages. Our main fund-raising method was sending letters to local unions around B.C. In many cases, this was followed up by personal discussions with active members of those unions, or by bank workers speaking at local union meetings.

We were part of the union movement and we needed support and solidarity. It made sense for other unions to help in the organization of this important unorganized industry, but we didn't like to have to be financially dependent on other unions. We hoped it was temporary. With 1000 dues-paying members in the banks we could cover our expenses but for the moment we had to rely on donations from other unions.

The fund-raising activities brought bank workers into contact with

experienced unionists who could help in other ways. They gave bank workers more information about unions in general and the union movement in their community. Over two years we raised about \$30,000 in donations and interest-free loans from other unions. Over 100 local unions in B.C. contributed. The unions that were the most generous were relatively small independent unions, because they understood our

The following unions donated to our organizing campaign in B.C. We apologize for any errors or omissions.

Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU)
 Association of University and College Employees (AUCE): Local 1, Local 2, Local 3, Local 4 and Provincial
 Bakery Confectionary and Tobacco Workers International Union, Local 475
 B.C. Ferry & Marine Workers Union
 B.C. Government Employees Union (BCGEU): Provincial and Administrative Support Component
 B.C. Projectionists Union
 Canadian Airline Flight Attendants Association
 Canadian Association of Industrial Mechanical and Allied Workers (CAIMAW) Local 6
 Canadian Association of Smelter and Allied Workers (CASAW)
 Canadian Brotherhood of Railway, Transport and General Workers (CBRT & GW), Local 400 Seamen's Section
 CBRT & GW Local 276
 Canadian Paperworkers Union (CPU), Local 76, Local 456, Local 592, Local 603, Local 686, Local 789, Local 1092, Local 1119, Local 1132
 Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW), locals in Vancouver, Kelowna, Mackenzie, New Westminster, Port Alberni, Powell River, Prince Rupert, Terrace, Trail
 Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), Local 881, Local 379, Local 439, Local 606, Local 626, Local 695, Local 718, Local 723, Local 728, Local 900, Local 1760
 Carpenters and Joiners, Local 1598, Local 1696, Local 1998, Local 2511, Local 3014
 Cement Lime & Gypsum Workers
 Distillery Workers, Local 604, Retail Wholesale & Department Store Union
 Hospital Employees Union (HEU)
 International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), Local 213, Local 1003, Local 2354
 International Woodworkers of America (IWA), Local 1-217, Local 1-367, Local 1-363, Local 1-80, Local 1-118, Local 1-405, Local 1-417
 Ladies Auxiliary Kamloops, Regional Council No. 1
 Labourers International Union Local 1093
 Letter Carriers Union of Canada (LCUC), Local 12, Local 32, Local 170, Local 172, Local 270
 Machinists
 National Association of Broadcast Employees & Technicians (NABET) Local 84
 Newspaper Guild
 Oil Chemical and Atomic Workers Local 9-675
 Plumbers Pipefitters and Steamfitters, Local 170
 Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) Local 20169, Local 20043
 Pulp Paper and Woodworkers of Canada (PPWC), Local 2, Local 3, Local 4, Local 8, Local 9, Local 10, Local 11, Local 15, Local 18 and National
 Social Service Employees Union Local 2 (VMREU)
 United Fishermen and Allied Workers Union (UFAWU), Local 1, Local 2, Local 4, Local 8, Local 10, Local 21, Local 26, Local 31, Local 42, Local 99
 United Transportation Union (UTU), Local 1051
 Vancouver Municipal and Regional Employees Union (VMREU)

needs more, although they could afford it less. AUCE, an organization consisting mostly of women clerical workers at universities and colleges in B.C., saw that in the long run they could be successful at improving conditions for their members only if clerical workers in the private sector were organized. Over the next two years they gave us over \$15,000 in donations and interest-free loans for the bank campaign, as well as donations to SORWUC Local 1 strike fund. The Pulp Paper and Woodworkers of Canada (PPWC) gave us over \$8,000 in donations and interest-free loans. PPWC is affiliated to the Confederation of Canadian Unions (CCU), an alternative organization to the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), formed by independent unions in opposition to the "international" (American) unions which dominate the CLC. We received \$5,250 from the Vancouver Municipal and Regional Employees Union (VMREU), another small, independent union.

We spoke at meetings of women's groups and NDP meetings. The amount of money from each meeting was small, but it did add up. At those meetings we met people who agreed to help in other ways—by handing out leaflets, helping with mailings and other office work, putting us in touch with bank workers they knew and with other organizations. We raised about \$3,000 from organizations other than unions, and \$3,000 from individuals.

We asked individual supporters, union locals and other organizations to pledge a certain amount on a monthly basis, so we would be in a position to budget to some extent rather than going from crisis to crisis. We weren't terribly successful, partly because we were so busy organizing we never found the time to establish our fund-raising on an efficient basis.

For the first seven months, our income generally increased along with our membership. By March, we had signed up twenty-two branches, and donations were coming in at the rate of almost \$900 per month.

*Now if you want equal wages let me tell you what you do
 You got to work with your sisters in the shop with you.
 If we all stick together now it won't be long...
 We'll open up new jobs... win equal pay... make that seniority list.
 —Barbara Wertheimer, "Talking Union"*

4 Talking Union

As a result of publicity about the union application at Victory Square, we met bank employees who had tried for years to organize. One of these employees was Charlotte Johnson. Here she tells about organizing in the data centres:

In February 1969, I started at the Commerce Data Centre as a machine operator. The machine looked like an old adding machine. By punching the keys, I encoded amounts and account numbers onto debits and credits of the numerous Commerce branches. I also added code numbers for service chargeable or non-service chargeable items. The items were designated as recurring debits or credits, blocked accounts, demand loan interest payments, or safety deposit box charges. When a new branch goes on computer, the balance of every account at that bank has to be fed into the computer; after that only the daily transactions need be entered.

There were easily 100 of us in one room, with about seventy-five noisy machines. It was impossible to talk, and the machines made it unbearably hot. In August, I became a reconciler. Reconciliation involves working with the computer print-out, correcting errors and balancing the branch totals. Although I was no longer working on a machine, I still worked in the same big room.

Staff morale was very low and the turnover very high. Supervisors treated the employees like they were liabilities to the company. When employees in my department voiced complaints, they were told: "All fifty of you can quit if you don't like it here and we'll hire fifty more tomorrow." (Too bad everyone didn't take them up on it!)

I resigned in the summer of 1970 and was hired at the Royal Data Centre. There were so many former Commerce employees working at the Royal, it was like old home week. The encoding machines used at the Royal had sixteen pockets (bins). The machine operators encoded the amount of the debit or credit and then pressed a number indicating the category of the item (other bank's cheques, family allowance cheques, travelers cheques, deposits, etc.). These cheques and deposits would be automatically sorted to the proper pocket. When the bin was full it would pop open. The operator would then take a total on that bin, record the total and remove the items. At the end of the shift, the operator would punch in all the totals (+debits, -credits) and balance. All bins then had to be totaled out for the next shift. The job was production. You had to be fast and accurate. If we didn't balance, we were supposed to punch out on time cards until we found the error, then

punch in again. Management wanted to know exactly how much of our shift we spent on production. We were treated like children and, like at the Commerce, the turnover was high.

I quit the Royal when I was going to have a new member in the family. As I was not "working" all I had to do was cook, clean house, wash clothes, sew and mend, chauffeur, shop, nurse, change diapers, iron and fold clothes, cut the lawn, garden, counsel, listen to and generally take care of a family of five. While I was enjoying the extra leisure time at home, a co-worker from the Commerce who was now a supervisor phoned several times asking me to return to the Commerce. She said I would notice a big change. I agreed to return but only as a part-time reconciler working two or three nights a week. Because the shift started at 5:45 p.m., it was possible to feed the kids supper before going to work. It was now February, 1974. Big changes! The only change was the new supervisors. Bank policy was bank policy and the bosses in Toronto were unreachable. We started talking union.

There were many grievances which led up to the union talk. Our shift supposedly ended at 12:45 a.m. If the volume of work was excessive, the employees would work overtime to get the items back to the branch for the next business day. If it was impossible to complete all the work, the items could be held over and backdated one day. When there was a holdover, the employees would have the previous day's holdover to complete in addition to the new day's transactions. If the systems were down or if deliveries were delayed, that also meant late nights. Nobody was asked if they wanted to work overtime. We were expected to work overtime and couldn't go home until we were dismissed. However, if the employees finished early they could leave and still be paid for the full shift. Sound like a good deal? The employees really pushed to get out early and on heavy nights, pushed even harder so they could get out of there before 2 or 3 a.m. So no matter what the volume of work was, the employees were always working at full speed.

Maximum production and computer time were the only interests management had. Half of the people in my department were part-time employees like myself. Some had been there as long as ten years. We got none of the regular benefits—no seniority, no sick leave, no medical plan, no pension plan. Some people had their hours cut arbitrarily and without warning while others were forced to resign because their hours were increased. Days off were changed without consultation or notice.

At one time management decided part-time employees would only be paid for hours worked, while the full-time employees would still be paid for the full shift if they finished early. At the coffee break, the full-time people were rushing to get back to work so that they could push the work through and get home early. The part-time people said that there was no way they were going to push themselves because then they wouldn't get paid for the full shift. Everyone started out in a kidding mood but it soon became heated. We could see that

this new policy was creating a division between full-time and part-time people so we decided to do something before it went any further. The part-time employees were scheduled to work heavy nights. If they happened to get an early night once in a while it was felt that they deserved it. With the support of all the employees, we went on a slow down. This caused problems with computer time and management restored the benefit to the part-time workers immediately.

Another grievance was secret pay cheques. You worked your butt off on increasing your production to get a \$1.00 per night raise. Then you found out that the new employee with no experience that you'd been training started at \$2.00 more per shift than you made. The supervisors used to hand out the pay slips but when we started discussing our wages, the pay slips were put in envelopes marked "private and confidential" and we were told not to discuss them.

Promotions went to employees who socialized with the supervisors, without regard for seniority or ability. Job vacancies were kept secret. Employees needing medical leaves were asked to resign. They would be rehired but with loss of benefits and loss of seniority for holidays, etcetera. A seven year employee was in a car accident and should have been able to recover without a worry because she had accrued sick time. Management asked for her resignation. I had heard that "the bank never fires anyone". Well they sure asked for a lot of resignations.

When the union talk started most of the employees thought that bank employees could not belong to a union. When I was trying to locate the proper union to join, I was told by the international OTEU that we could not join a union. I was mad! What right did they have to say bank workers couldn't join a union? I then talked to the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and was told we could join a union but the Labour Board would probably reject it if it was with an international union. CUPE put the Association of Commercial and Technical Employees (ACTE) in touch with me and we were off (or so we thought).

The ACTE organizing drive began in February 1975 and it went surprisingly well at first. The Data Centre employed about 375 people of whom sixty-seven were manager, assistant manager, department heads, supervisors or assistant supervisors. It was a hard place to organize as different shifts had almost no contact with one another. Employees were divided not only by shifts but by departments, rooms, and floors. We knew that to be successful we had to get people on the different shifts organized.

Myself and another part-time worker, Janette Hegglin, signed up our fellow workers. We would visit people at home or take them out for coffee. When we had signed a majority in one department, we moved on to the next one. In the first month, Janette and I signed up fifty-four people. I still have that wonderful list.

We held our first meeting March 16, 1975 at a hotel in Burnaby.

Then all hell broke loose!

The assistant manager, the new personnel manager, and the shift

manager came to my department and stood with their arms folded across their chests watching the employees do their work. This went on every night for two weeks and the employees were very jumpy and afraid to be seen talking with Janette or myself.

An administrative officer came right out and asked one employee if she had started the union drive. This employee had previously been demoted when a friend of a supervisor was given her job. She had then had a nervous breakdown and was off work for three months. I guess they thought she had good reason to unionize.

Management and supervisors of all shifts had a meeting and came out with a list of possible union organizers—all the employees they knew to be unhappy with working conditions. (I bet it was a long one.) A friendly supervisor phoned to tell me that Janette and I were on the list and that we were considered the main organizers.

Employees were called into the office individually and questioned as to how much they knew about the union and whether or not they were members.

Clara had not received her pay cheque for six weeks due to a foulup in Payroll. They could have made up a cheque manually but instead kept promising "the next pay day". Clara phoned me and said that usually she sat on the fence but since she felt she was getting shafted by the bank she wanted to join the union. It was at her request that I signed her up. She was called into the office by our supervisor. He said, "I understand that you were pressured into joining the union." He was fishing and she jumped for the bait. She agreed she was indeed pressured and when the supervisor asked who did the pressuring, she said, "Charlotte".

Ruth, a part-time employee, was told by a friend who was a branch manager with the Royal, that if she became involved with the union she would be blacklisted. She phoned to warn me that maybe I should also withdraw from the union.

Ruth was called in to the personnel manager's office regarding a staff loan even though we had been told that part-time employees not eligible for staff loans. She was given a loan but she also gave the manager a list of employees who had attended the meeting at the hotel and named the executive. This meeting had been for whoever was interested and not just members. When I asked Ruth about this later, she dismissed it by saying it didn't matter because management knew who they were anyway. Even though I knew that my co-workers were frightened I was annoyed with them. Some of them were falling all over themselves to spill all.

Rhonda, a supervisor, and Marilyn, her assistant and good friend, were told by management that they were not considered management and were encouraged to speak against the union and to try to get people to withdraw from the union. Rhonda agreed to do this and even told some of us, "I care nothing for the friggin' girls, only my career." She told everyone the union organizers would be fired. The employees were also told that the data centre would close down and work would

be flown to Toronto. That would have been something to see! First the computers would have to be programmed to take B.C. branches. Secondly, since we had a hard time getting our own branches done on time and wouldn't know what to do with all of the East's, it would have been interesting indeed to see what Toronto would do with ours.

Management cut Janette's and my days down, so we both applied for full-time jobs. They hoped and even suggested that we quit. Since they didn't want to hire us full-time, and were hesitant about hiring new employees ahead of us, our department became very short-staffed. Some co-workers asked us to withdraw our full-time applications so the bank would hire more employees. But we said no, that both of us were experienced and capable employees and we wanted full-time work. Finally management hired two new employees in another department, then transferred them into our department.

I was not at work the night the two employees started but I was scheduled to work the next. When Janette went into the office to find out why inexperienced people had been hired when she had seven years experience and had been requesting full-time work for several months—she was fired—for questioning the decision of her supervisors! I was called at home by my supervisor at 10 p.m. and told not to come to work until the following week. I figured they didn't want me around stirring up trouble about Janette's firing. Janette filed an Unfair Labour Practice complaint through ACTE.

All along, the ACTE reps' attitude was that they would give the organizing a try but it was very unlikely we could do it. This made organizing difficult. They had said to me: "We don't want you to get off the merry-go-round if we take this on." Janette and I put our jobs on the line and Janette lost hers. The ACTE reps never committed themselves or any of the CLC's "million dollar white collar organizing fund" we would hear so much about later. Only once did they hand out leaflets—ACTE booklets which meant nothing to the bank workers. I wrote a leaflet dealing with some bank workers' problems because ACTE said they would have it printed and handed out, but after I gave it to them I never saw it again. We knew the organizing was finished when we gave the reps a list of 110 data centre employees to help sign up and they visited maybe two of them in three months. Just before Janette was fired we had been talking about approaching another union but we didn't know which one.

I saw an article in the newspaper about a lunch hour meeting at the Vancouver Public Library put on by SORWUC, a union interested in organizing women. This certainly caught my attention. I attended the meeting and Janette and I decided to approach SORWUC after her complaint was settled.

The complaint was not settled until July, 1976 (Janette had been fired in January) when she got an out of court settlement. Part of the settlement was that I be given full-time employment. The ACTE rep said, "Keep in touch". That was it.

Shortly after this, we read in the paper that SORWUC had applied for certification at the Commerce Victory Square branch. It was very

exciting! We were right about SORWUC being interested in bank workers. I contacted them, went to a meeting and soon was up to my eyebrows in organizing again.

Working with people in SORWUC was a whole different experience. I didn't have to try and convince them that a union was needed in the banks. They were working there, and were experiencing the same difficulties, unfairness, poor working conditions and wages that I was. And it didn't matter which chartered bank, our stories were similar. Working with SORWUC and the other unions that were giving them their support, I understood what trade unionism and solidarity meant.

However, there had been a lot of changes at the Data Centre since the ACTE organizing drive. The on-line computer system in the branches was doing away with many jobs and the employees were afraid to join the union because the job situation was so unstable. Management brought in workers from temporary agencies instead of hiring new employees. Management assured people that there would be no layoffs but we didn't have much faith in what they were saying and when employees were transferred to jobs they didn't like, they didn't complain but were thankful to still be working. Management was not taking employees' wishes into consideration. They brought in a career counselor but nothing ever came of it. We were told we could have three minutes with him, that's how much our "careers" mattered.

We wrote a leaflet for Data Centre employees and SORWUC members leafletted the Centre several times. We held meetings, phoned employees at home and knocked on doors. Those who had actively supported ACTE usually joined SORWUC (although some of them asked for their \$5.00 ACTE membership fee back). Those who had passively watched the ACTE drive fizzle out were not about to support yet another organizing drive. Meetings were attended by fewer and fewer people. When we applied for the Scotia Data Centre, the Commerce Data Centre employees said "let's wait and see what happens there and see what they get before we join."

Shortly after the UBW leafletted the Scotia Data Centre some employees contacted the union office. We were very pleased with the response and a meeting was set up at the home of one of the employees. At the first meeting the employees discussed reasons for wanting to join a union—better wages, a dental plan, grievance procedure, protection for part-time workers, regular coffee breaks, and shift differential.

At the Scotia, the employees on afternoon shift were all part-time with the exception of one full-time employee. Her job was to trouble check—if one of the machine operators didn't balance or was having problems she assisted them. Machine operators were paid by piece work—so many items for so many dollars. New employees were expected to average 900 to 1000 items per hour after three months and experienced employees about 1300 per hour. To receive an increment, employees would have to increase their production average and hold that average for three months. If your production dropped for three

months your wages would drop accordingly. All employees received the annual cost-of-living increases.

The majority of employees worked afternoon shift, 6:00 p.m. to 1:00 a.m. They had the same system of working until the work was finished as the Commerce, except the Scotia employees received no regular coffee break.

By the time we had a few more meetings several more employees had been signed up. There was no way of getting an exact number of employees working at the Centre but the organizers estimated eighty-five. I stressed that we should sign up a majority of employees before we applied for certification. Otherwise the Board would order a vote and the several months of waiting would give management several months for anti-union activity and I already knew what they could do.

When we finally applied for union certification on February 28, 1977, we did not have a majority. Nevertheless we were really pleased about our first application for a data centre. Our press conference was given by myself and two Scotia data centre employees. Press people were packed into our union office. We told them that the work done at the data centres was crucial and "a 24-hour shut down of the data centres would cripple the B.C. banking industry." We explained that we had joined the UBW because it is an independent union committed to maintaining democracy in the union and we called on all bank workers to join with us in our struggle for better wages and working conditions.

*If anyone should ask of you your union to sell
Just tell them where to go, send them back to hell
Get thee behind me Satan, travel on down the line
I am a union woman, going to leave that devil behind.*

—The Almanac Singers "Get Thee Behind me Satan"
(slightly rewritten)

5 The Anti-Union Campaign

As our sign-up campaign across the province got into full swing, those opposed to the union also geared up. One group—bank management—we assumed would oppose the union. We were even prepared for them to put up a ferocious anti-union campaign. What we were not prepared for was that some employees would buckle under so quickly and that a few would turn on the union. Initially, these people argued on an individual level with pro-union people but did not actively oppose the pro-union choice of their co-workers. They joined the anti-union campaign only when they were convinced there were rewards involved in doing so, or punishment in not doing so.

As the union drive progressed the arguments for and against the union became more complex. Originally, the anti-union employees told us that joining the union was illegal (against the Bank Act), that the banks were just too powerful to allow a union and that we were crazy. They said unions were run by corrupt men who drove Cadillacs and went around ordering people out on strike. We got ourselves copies of the Bank Act and found it had nothing in it about unions. We distributed leaflets and argued about what kind of union SORWUC is.

Dorothy Hooper and Bonnie Wong, the employees sent to Victory Square from Regional Office, set about organizing the opposition. The anti-union employees at Victory Square had buttons and leaflets printed in the name of Bankers Independent Group (BIG). The core of the group was the most senior employees and the supervisors at Victory Square and, of course, Hooper and Wong. Victory Square remained the centre of anti-union activity. Later, BIG got in touch with some employees at the Scotia Data Centre who wrote some leaflet articles. But BIG never really consisted of more than the Victory Square people.

At one point during the campaign we came into work and found BIG leaflets on our desks. As the leaflets were there before the regular mail arrived, we suspected they had been sent via inter-branch mail. The union filed a complaint charging management complicity in the distribution of these anti-union leaflets. We later withdrew the charge for lack of evidence; no one seemed to know how the leaflets had arrived at the branches. (Occasionally the union office received calls about these leaflets. "I just got this terrible leaflet opposed to a union in the banks. I didn't know there was a union in the banks. How do I join?")

There were regular staff meetings (compulsory attendance on company time) where the branch manager would give a "progress report" on the union drive and outline what would happen if we went union. They told us that unions meant everyone had to follow a book of rules,

that things would be regimented, that we might have to punch a time clock, and lose our flexible hours (i.e. unpaid overtime!), and we would no longer be able to speak for ourselves (i.e. one teller against the whole bank!)—the union would do it for us. Commerce employees were given a memo eight pages long with questions and answers concerning unions.

The union's main method for communicating with bank workers and answering management memos and anti-union rumours was through the media. We wrote the statements ourselves. We were honest and we were bank workers doing the telling. The press liked us. We were called the "feisty little union", "David", and so forth. We spoke on hotline shows, did feature interviews on TV and in the papers. Whether it was CBC National News or the local community station, we were anxious to talk, to argue about a union in the banks. BIG did only one press release that we know of. The banks are always close-mouthed with the press. So basically we had the media to ourselves.

Our leaflets were also an important means of reaching bank workers. It took lots of energy to write the leaflets, type and lay them out, find graphics, and get them to the printers. Press Gang printed beautiful leaflets for us at cost, otherwise our printing bill would have been astronomical.

Over the years, SORWUC had built quite a leafletting network. It was at its peak during the bank drive. There were tens of thousands of leaflets distributed throughout the province, by women's groups, trade unionists, teachers, NDPers, and many non-aligned supporters. Local 1 members did most of the leafletting in Vancouver and spent long hours organizing leaflet distribution. Each leaflet had a small coupon on the bottom to return to the union office and eventually we stapled membership forms to each leaflet.

But our access to unorganized bank workers couldn't compare with that of bank management. In branches where we had applied for certification, we argued with the manager but in those branches where we had no members, it was his show completely. Even where we did speak up we were at a disadvantage in terms of status. Who would believe us—we were only the employees whereas they were "the bosses"; they had "the money".

When the union office got word that the manager was calling a meeting about the union we would often call the manager and threaten him with an unfair labour practice complaint. We would read to him those sections of the Canada Labour Code that prohibit employers from intimidating employees or interfering in the formation of a trade union. We got the usual answer each time we wrote or called: "I'm a human being. I have a right to express my opinion. Don't you people believe in freedom of speech? This is a free country". We were warned against filing an unfair labour practice complaint about these meetings on the grounds that the bank would appeal to the federal court to get a definitive and bad precedent on employers' rights to "freedom of speech".

The banks used a standard tactic of employers faced with a union campaign—some sudden improvements in conditions and benefits. A dental plan was announced; we got new electric typewriters to replace the manuals; we got new calculators, more adding machines, extra staff, and a new policy of no more deductions for teller cash shortages. In the Commerce they threw in two coffee breaks a day and at the Bank of Montreal they instituted a job posting procedure. They told us that, unfortunately, because of the Anti-Inflation Board they couldn't give us a big raise, but as soon as the wage guidelines were lifted the possibilities were endless.



The union tried to counter the banks' propaganda by mailing to union representatives a regular report of our own to be circulated in the branch. "The Weekly Bulletin" was mailed each Monday. It was a one or two page update of the previous week's activities: legal battles we had won or lost, interesting phone calls, a running tally on branches we had applied for, notices of meetings and later, progress reports on negotiations. Sometimes we included copies of significant letters we had received from other unions or the banks. This, while it was the best that could be done from the union office, had hardly any effect. The fiercest battle was fought in the branch among the employees.

It was not difficult to figure out who was pro or anti union, especially when we were individually confronted by loans officers or supervisors and asked to sign letters or petitions against the union. Although loans officers and supervisors were employees and we wanted to have them included in the bargaining unit, they were seen as representatives of management. The personal supervisory authority that employees have over each other is bolstered by the wage differential between employees. The ratio was as high as three to one among employees within the bargaining unit. It was not uncommon to find a branch manager (a position excluded from the bargaining unit) get promoted to a larger branch as a loans officer (a position included in the bargaining unit). No wonder loans officers often felt more in common with branch managers—their wages and lifestyles were more like managers' than tellers'.

In the couple of months immediately preceding the CLRB hearings, the union office regularly received letters of resignation from members.

Dodie Kerr, President,
Sorwuc local 2
#1114 - 207 W. Hastings
Vancouver, B.C.

Oct. 24, 1976

Dear Dodie:

Having given this considerable thought, I have come to the conclusion I must withdraw my membership from S.O.R.W.U.C.

My decision is governed by several factors, but the main ones are purely personal. I feel very strongly that my job of 17 years standing is in jeopardy and, having to support my husband, this has swayed my judgement. Also the great worry of a terminally ill parent. I find I'm just not able to cope with this controversial issue.

Nonetheless, I wish you every success in your endeavours, but personally feel the time is not quite "ripe" for us Bankers in B.C.!

Nov. 7/76

Dear Dodie

Please accept this as my resignation from S.O.R.W.U.C.

As this is a fairly small community, the opportunities for employment are fairly limited, and should the Commerce close its branch on this island (as has been rumoured) I am not prepared to start looking for new employment at this time. I sincerely wish you every success in trying to get the banks unionized.

We were afraid to open the mail. The letters reflected, in different ways, management's interference in our choice to join the union. Several of the letters from different branches in different parts of B.C. were identically worded, including the same spelling error in the first sentence. During one set of CLRB hearings, when questioned by the union lawyer, an employee who had signed one of the protest letters admitted that she had got the letter from her supervisor who had got it from an employee at Victory Square.

People were promised long awaited transfers and promotions. They were told that these promotions or transfers couldn't, of course, take effect until this union mess was cleaned up. They said that the sooner people withdrew from the union, the sooner it would be cleaned up.

The banks also zeroed in on individual employees. At the Ganges branch of the Commerce they decided it was necessary, because of the shortage of work, to "lay-off" Chris, the head teller and union activist. They told her she could re-apply in a few months if there was a vacancy. At the same time they announced that a management trainee was coming from Vancouver to train at the branch. We filed a complaint with the CLRB. The bank decided it had all been a mistake and they had never meant to "lay-off" Chris. At Port McNeill the bank decided that Susan, one of their part-time employees, and a union member, was no longer needed at the branch. The union members in the branch reacted angrily and quickly. There were frantic phone calls back and forth between the members in the branch, the union office, the lawyers, and the Regional Office. It had all been a mistake. The bank had never meant to "lay-off" Susan.

At Victory Square, Dodie and Jackie were moved from the ledgers department to the teller line. Our lawyer said it was not an unfair labour practice because there was no "pecuniary loss"—the bank continued to pay them at the same rate. However, people in the branch saw going from a desk job to being on cash as a serious demotion, even if the pay was the same. One of the tellers who had withdrawn from the union was given Jackie's ledger position.

Sometimes the opposite occurred and it worked just as well in unsettling the branch. That is, sometimes the union activists were promoted out of the bargaining unit. In one branch, one of the main union activists went from ledgerkeeper to accountant, a management position.

In some branches where employees had regularly been leaving at 4:30, the supervisors required that we stay and do filing until 5 p.m. saying that this would "give us a taste of what it would be like when the union got in". In some branches there was a freeze on hiring. When an employee quit she was not replaced. In a couple of branches this reached a ridiculous point and people became frantic with overwork. Management said that until this union mess was cleared up, Regional Office would not send anyone new to the branch.

Tension in the branches was high and personal harassment common. Rather than withdraw from the union, some people quit in disgust.

But this had the same practical effect as withdrawing—there was one less union member in an already small unit.

We were shocked at the reaction of some of the more senior staff. One paragraph of a leaflet we distributed called "Let's Work Together" describes our feelings: "Senior staff have the most to gain from unionization—proper job postings, orderly and fair promotion procedures, longer vacations, monetary recognition of skill and seniority, and a union grievance procedure. . . . The union understands that some managers are upset at the possible loss of arbitrary personal authority from unionization; but we are amazed that some senior clerical staff, whose incomes are considerably less than those of unskilled workers in union jobs, should campaign against the union. Instead, as bank employees we should be working together to democratically determine our proposals for wages and working conditions."

We preferred to meet anti-union employees head on. When there was division in the branches, we encouraged union and anti-union people to get together and debate the issue. On an issue by issue basis, we generally won. In branches where this debate did occur, the tension was eased whether or not individuals changed their minds about the union.

BIG didn't like debates. In one branch the loans officer had set up a branch meeting on a Saturday morning to which he invited some BIG people. Union members in the branch contacted the union office and invited union people to come also. When we showed up at the meeting, BIG refused to debate with us. Because BIG wouldn't debate, this meeting allowed one-half hour for BIG people to speak and then half an hour for union representatives. It didn't look good for BIG. If the union people were willing to stay and debate, what was BIG afraid of?

Bonnie Wong also made a trip to Kamloops where she met with branch employees, sometimes on company time, usually at the bank, to talk to them about the union. In one of these Kamloops meetings, she described how a SORWUC cheque had bounced on a union member's personal account at the Victory Square branch. Presumably she was trying to demonstrate the union's sad financial state, something we had never kept secret. However, this cheque had been bounced in error and the manager of our credit union later apologized. Wong's mistake was in publicly discussing the confidential details of a customer account—a serious offense for any bank employee. We sued her for libel. This action effectively ended Wong's anti-union activities. The suit was later dropped but it had the desired effect.

The union members in Port McNeill wrote a leaflet for distribution to Kamloops branches. Wong had told bank workers in Kamloops that "happy" branches had become divided and torn once they had applied for union certification. The Port McNeill leaflet said: "Not everyone in our branch has decided to join the union, but this has not disrupted the manner in which the branch runs—in fact, staff turnover has decreased since we decided to unionize, making for a smoother running branch. We did not join SORWUC out of spite towards our manager or because

we disliked our jobs—we like our work but we want to improve our working situation."

In branches where the supervisors were pro-union we hardly ever heard of any problems until after they had been solved. In a Bank of Montreal branch, where the main union activists were the most senior employees, the manager tried to break up their group by re-scheduling their coffee breaks. For over ten years this group had been taking their coffee together each morning. When the manager tried to split them up, he was told that what he was doing was against the Labour Code. The chief clerk removed the coffee break schedule the manager had posted and placed it on her desk in full view along with a copy of the Labour Code. The manager was invited to discuss it with her whenever he liked. He never did get around to talking to her about it and coffee breaks went on as they always had.

Heavy intimidation in the branches often wore down union members as the days and weeks and months went by. In some cases the gap between the application and the hearings was eight months. There was then a further wait before certification. When calling the union office, the first thing bank workers said after hello was: is there a date set for the hearing yet?

At a general membership meeting on March 17, 1977, we decided that if the CLRB didn't contact us within two weeks with a date for our hearing, we would hold a press conference to protest the delay. We had been respectfully silent about the Canada Labour Relations Board up to that time. They had an important hearing to arrange and we didn't want to rush them. Besides, they had a lot of power and we didn't want to antagonize them. But our first branch had applied for certification seven months before and there was still no word of a hearing date. The number of new members had decreased considerably since the new year—everyone was waiting for the decision.

A week after the general meeting we got the word. The hearings were to be held in Vancouver the week of April 18, 1977.

*People together have power
Now is the hour to use our strength wisely
Sharing and caring and winning the right to beginning
To live out a life for ourselves.*

—“Song For Ourselves” based on Chris Williamson’s
“Song of the Soul”

6 The Hearings

The hearings began April 18, 1977 on the seventh floor of a federal government office building at 750 Cambie Street in Vancouver. The hearing room had tables set up in one large square. At the front of the room were three large chairs for the Board members. On one side was a chair for the secretary; on the other a chair for the witness. Along the back table, facing the Board, were chairs for all the lawyers. The tables were equipped with microphones, shiny pitchers and water glasses.

Behind the square were rows of chairs for spectators, and at the back of the room, a recording table. The spectators’ chairs were filled. We had arranged time off for a rep from each branch and the officers of the UBW to attend the hearings. The union paid our wages. There were always about a dozen bank workers present.

Outside the hearing room was a room with vinyl couches, ceramic coffee tables and a speaker system so that the proceedings could be heard. Three or four adjoining offices were used for caucus meetings.

Dodie Zerr describes the hearings.

We had never laid eyes on any of the bank’s big shots, their lawyers or the Board members before. That first day, there they all were, congregated in the outer room.

The bankers and their lawyers talked as if the Board was impertinent to have bothered them at all—and to hold the hearings in Vancouver just didn’t make sense. After all, Commerce Court is in Toronto, and they are busy men. Nevertheless, there they were in their grey suits, with gold watches and fat briefcases. At long last we were meeting the gents who were not only our bosses, but were close to the boys who ran the fiscal fibres of our country. All I could think of was how much money they made, and the trouble we were causing them.

The bank’s lawyers were two senior partners from a fancy law firm in Toronto. They had a Vancouver lawyer to assist them. All the banks—Commerce, Montreal, Scotia, and Toronto-Dominion—had the same lawyers, and presumably the same position on the bargaining unit question. The Board was going to start by hearing the eight branches of the Commerce. While each bank would thereafter be heard separately, subsequent decisions would be determined by that first historic decision.

For the last few weeks we had been frantically preparing for this moment. Ian Donald, our lawyer, and articling student Peter Doherty were working full-time on the case. We spent many hours with them going over testimony and preparing for cross-examination of the bank’s

witnesses. We were nervous, but proud and confident that our twenty applications showed this was no flash in the pan but the beginning of a big campaign. We felt that this time the Board would have to lay out the rules for organizing the banks.

In the branches, we had our first taste of legitimacy. Union members attended the hearings as the representatives of employees in their branch. The fight was not between SORWUC and BIG, as management had tried to make out. The fight was between the union and the banks.

After a meeting between the Board members and the lawyers, the hearings got under way. Three members of the CLRB sat facing the bank’s lawyers, our lawyers and Bonnie Wong’s lawyer. Because we had raised the issue of anti-union activities at Victory Square, Wong attended each day of the hearings with observer status.

The hearing room was packed with SORWUC members and supporters, other trade unionists, management types from other banks and from credit unions and trust companies, and reporters. The Board, in consultation with the lawyers, decided to hear evidence and argument on whether a branch was an appropriate bargaining unit first. Then they would proceed to the issues of whether SORWUC was a proper trade union, whether we had a majority in each branch, whether there had been improper conduct on the part of bank management, and which positions in each branch should be included in the bargaining unit.

The Chairman of the Board began by outlining the reports of the investigating officers on each of the branches—how many employees in each branch, which positions were being contested by the union or the bank, whether or not the union had a majority. He also outlined the structure of the Commerce as a whole—fourteen regions in the country, 1693 branches in Canada (114 outside Canada), 243 branches in B.C., 3900 full-time and part-time employees in B.C. including 1800 in Greater Vancouver.

The lawyers made their opening remarks. Ian’s speech was extensively quoted in the press. He said it was amazing that the banks had avoided collective bargaining to date. Was that because of the bank’s great generosity in providing fantastic salaries and great benefits? That was doubtful. Part of the fault might lie with the labour movement. But mostly it was because of the bank’s successful efforts in killing any attempts at organizing.

“The basic reason why there has been no collective representation at the bank, I suggest, is a myth that banks are immune from trade union representation. . . . Together with that myth there is a fear of loss of jobs, loss of job advancement and its concomitant feeling of helplessness in the face of large and powerful institutions. . . .”

“There must, in our respectful view, be a clear message transmitted throughout Canada that a bank can indeed be certified, for only then will the fears be allayed and the immunity myth destroyed.”

The bank’s lawyer was brief. He said that the bank was responsible and responsive to its employees and customers and described the banking industry as a highly sensitive critical mechanism. He said that his

evidence would show the complexity of the banking structure. He also warned that he would argue that the Board should not decide on another unit if the union was unsuccessful in its bid for branch by branch certification. This would have forced us to guess again. Knowing only that the branch was not a unit, we would have to organize, say, the whole province and apply for certification without knowing whether the province was a unit or not.

The presentation of SORWUC's evidence began after lunch. Jean Rands, National President, was our first witness. She described the formation and goals of SORWUC, the history of the bank drive, and why we thought the branch was an appropriate unit. Through Jean's answers to Ian's questions, we put forward our case that bank workers did not in practice have the right to organize because the bargaining unit had never been determined. Jean talked about how hard it was to sign up bank workers when we had to admit that we didn't even know the rules of the game yet.

She defended our actions in applying for certification for branch units even though we were having second thoughts about that bargaining unit. The day before the hearing started, a UBW special membership meeting voted that "in terms of the objectives of our union, the province would be the best bargaining unit." This motion was the result of intense anti-union pressure in the branches, the difficulty of maintaining majorities in individual branches, and our feeling that bank workers organized on a province wide basis would have more bargaining power. Already we felt we could take on a larger unit.

Jean mostly argued that the Board had to define a bargaining unit so that bank workers would know they had the right to organize. She had quite a debate with the bank's lawyer on this. He argued that the union had told bank employees through thousands of bulletins, and through the press, that they had the right to organize and that therefore we couldn't argue that they didn't know that. Jean replied "bank employees are not going to be convinced by reading a leaflet. The fact is that no bank employees in English Canada have collective bargaining rights and until they do they're not going to believe that they can have them."

She went on to say "the legal precedent that most people are aware of, often in a distorted form, is the Bank of Nova Scotia Kitimat decision in 1959, and we have also discussed that in bulletins. We know, and bank employees know, that the bank's argument at that time was that the only appropriate bargaining unit was a national unit of all of their employees in the whole country. And many bank employees, along with many other people, were under the mistaken impression that the 1959 Kitimat decision had agreed with the bank's contention that the only appropriate bargaining unit was a national unit."

Typically underestimating us and all bank employees, the Bank's lawyer couldn't believe that we would have been affected by a CLRB decision. After all, the banks' employees are perfectly happy and not at all interested in unions. He expressed disbelief that bank workers had

heard about the Kitimat decision. "And how would they, if they heard it, understand it?" he blustered indignantly. "Now would you please explain that to the Board. You're asking the Board to believe that the employees of this bank, because of a decision of the federal Board many years ago, decided that they didn't have the right to have a union. Do you expect the Board to accept that, Miss Rands?"

"I have met, personally, dozens of bank employees who have informed me that legally the banks can only be organized nationally," Jean replied. "I have also met a dozen or so bank employees who knew more specifically either that a bank in Kitimat had applied and been rejected or another distorted version of it, such as that bank in Nova Scotia had applied and been rejected on the grounds that only the whole country could be organized. That's the kind of feedback that I to some extent assume comes from the Kitimat decision. Okay?"

The bank's lawyer still couldn't believe it. "So you are asking the Board to believe that in your campaign for the last several months, starting last August, employees were so overwhelmed by the effect and impact of the Kitimat decision that they didn't think they could have a union. Is that right?"

"I'm saying that employees were so overwhelmed by the size and apparent power of the Canadian chartered banks, and by the fact that none of them have been organized, that they did not feel that they practically had the right to trade union representation."

"I'm mystified how so many people should know about a decision, a technical decision of the Board, made by the Board nineteen years ago. However."

"Well, you know, I worked in insurance for a long, long time, and I'll tell you that every time I worked in a place and talked about a union, I was told about someone who had talked about a union and been fired, five or ten or fifteen years previously. It's amazing the long memories that people have."

"Well yours seems to be like that of an elephant."

The bank's lawyer had a newspaper clipping quoting Jackie as saying that SORWUC was "prepared to tackle the banks on a province-wide basis". He asked whether Jean agreed with Jackie's statement. Jean said, "whatever this Board decides, bank employees are going to unionize. The success we've had so far demonstrates that. People are not going to be prepared to give up." There followed a long argument between the lawyers about whether or not Jean had agreed with Jackie's statement.

We were actually glad that the bank introduced this evidence. We couldn't disclaim the branch unit at these hearings because that would amount to withdrawing our applications for certification. But we did want the Board to consider geographic units as an alternative.

The scariest questions of all were the ones about our constitution. The constitution said that where a local existed, application for membership must be made to the Local. It was revealed through Jean's testimony that we had violated that section. Even after Local 2 was

formed, bank workers joined as headquarters members of the National Union and it was the National Union that applied for certification in the banks.

As we expected, the bank did a great song and dance on this point. They said our applications should be dismissed without a hearing because SORWUC National had no members in the banks. Our whole campaign could be wiped out on a technicality! They tried to get Jean to say that people who joined before Local 2 was formed had been transferred into Local 2 and were therefore no longer members of the National; and people who joined after Local 2 was formed were signed up in violation of the constitution and therefore weren't members at all. Jean kept repeating firmly that members of SORWUC locals were automatically members of the National Union.

The other major issue was whether we had a majority in each branch, and whether the withdrawals and resignations from the union should be considered in determining whether we had a majority.

The Board had previously ruled that the majority would be determined as of the date of the application for certification. The withdrawals came much later and were therefore considered irrelevant. However, shortly before the hearings, the rules had been changed. The Federal Court of Appeal had overturned a CLRB decision to grant certification at CKOY radio station. The Court ruled that the Board must determine majority status as of the date that the Board made its decision on whether or not to grant certification. This meant that we would only be certified if we had maintained our majorities through months and months of delay. Supposedly, the Canada Labour Code guaranteed our right to organize, but when we tried to put it into practice all sorts of mysterious obstacles were thrown in the way.

We attempted to present our case that the withdrawals resulted from management interference and should be disregarded. The Board did not allow much evidence along these lines—after all, Jean was not a bank worker who had withdrawn from the union and anything she had to say on the subject would be hearsay. However, she did make the point that the Board's long delay was a problem in itself—most of the withdrawals had come months after we had applied for certification.

After the lawyers had finished with Jean, the Board members asked questions like: How many meetings did you hold in this campaign? How many leaflets were distributed? Is it really true that there are no paid officers of the union? How many union officers work full-time or part-time on a volunteer basis? They seemed surprised and impressed at the answers. Throughout Jean's testimony, we gave her support from the audience as best we could—winking, laughing, even (to the Chairman's annoyance) elapping once or twice.

Members of Local 1 were running back and forth between the union office and the hearings, looking for files and delivering messages. They took detailed minutes. Each evening during the hearings, the notes were summarized and typed up for the early morning meeting we held each day with our lawyer. Copies of these minutes and all the exhibits were sent to the Canadian Union of Bank Employees (CUBE)

in Ontario to help them prepare for their hearings which would be immediately after ours. UBW members got together for supper every night to go over our notes, try to figure out who was winning, and ready ourselves for the next day. Working in the bank was never this much fun. Though we were exhausted each night, we felt competent and strong.

The bank's first witness took the stand the second morning. E.S. Duffield was senior vice-president of Human Resources and Administration. He had been with the Commerce for thirty-eight years. Duffield explained the structure of senior management in the bank. The bank's lawyer brought out evidence about the services Head Office supplied to branches (computers, etc.) and bank policy effected at the Head Office level. It was a great sedative. Things picked up when Ian began cross-examination. Duffield said that personnel policies were set at the Head Office level but were carried out at the discretion of branch managers. Hiring and firing is done on Manager's recommendations. Managers and Regional Office have the power to carry out general policies set by Head Office and make decisions on a day-to-day basis regarding personnel. This man from Commerce Court seemed terribly removed from the goings on in an ordinary bank branch. He knew where all the Commerce U.S. branches were and how many they had in Europe, but couldn't remember how many there were in the Yukon.

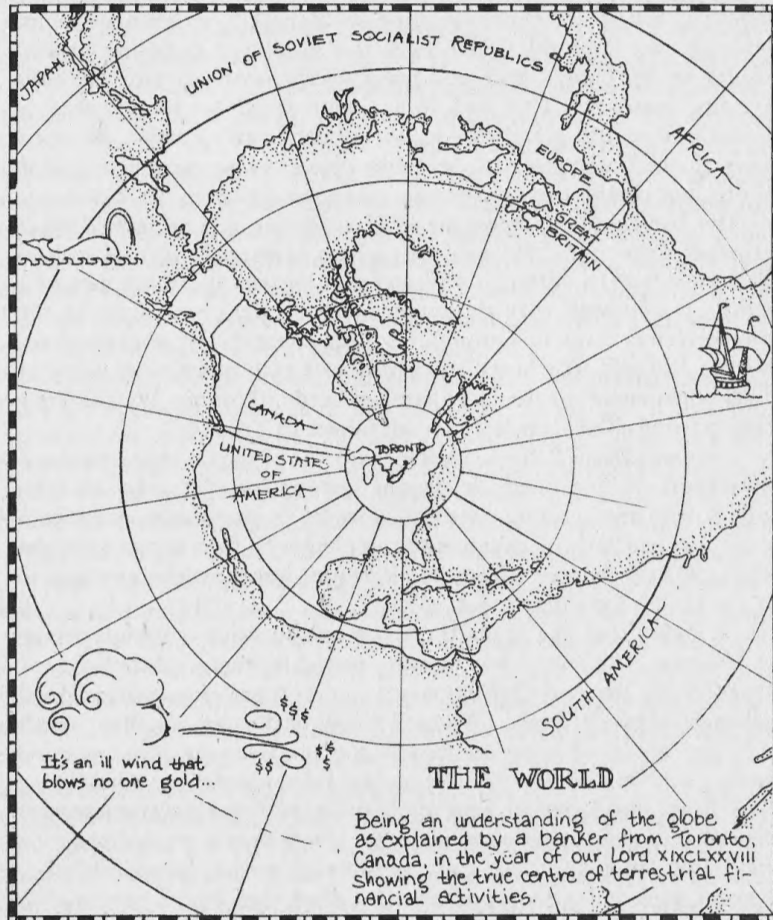
The bank's next witness was Philip Cotton, the vice president of personnel since 1976. He was the modern personnel man. He seemed determined not to admit to any shred of autonomy on the part of a branch. It appeared that absolutely every decision ever made in the Commerce was made in Toronto. He often contradicted what Duffield, his boss, had said. (Us bored spectators sent each other notes, some of which commented on the fact that God lived in Toronto. We also drew maps showing all of Canada as a small suburb of Toronto.)

Next was David Balmer, assistant director of the Canadian Bankers' Association. He explained the clearing systems for the banks and compared it with the system in the U.S. I won't go into it as elaborately as he did. He had tons of documents complete with flow charts. How the clearing system worked was quite interesting but the testimony was, to say the least, a little drawn out.

He stated that in Canada there was one common system for clearing cheques. The two basic clearing methods were a centralized exchange at the Bank of Canada points, and in more remote areas, local exchange between banks. When a bank exchanges another bank's item, two pieces of paper are passed. Net positions are calculated and reserves held in the Bank of Canada are then adjusted by transferring value from one bank to another. Balmer said the government was interested in developing a telex system which would require common procedures and restrict the autonomy of each branch using the system. Was the bank going to argue that the whole banking system was so closely interconnected that the only logical bargaining unit would be all the employees of all the banks in the whole country?

The next witness was Ronald White, assistant general manager, systems division, of the Commerce. His job was maintenance and development of computer systems. He gave impressive and boring details of how each system worked. The point seemed to be that branches were not autonomous and that all important functions took place in Toronto. Our lawyer brought out the fact that the bank relied on unionized companies to provide some computer servicing and courier services and the bank had managed to survive. There was a discussion of the implications of strikes, fires, floods and other acts of God on the Canadian banking system.

By now we were on Day Three. The bank had finished presenting their evidence about the bargaining unit question. There was more consultation between Board and lawyers. We had planned to present more evidence on the difficulty of organizing in the banks, specifically the anti-union acts of management in the Commerce. The banks argued



that this all had nothing to do with an appropriate bargaining unit. We argued that it did, because it had to do with difficulty in organizing. Clearly it had to do with determining the union's majority status. But as the bank's witnesses droned on and on, we realized that if we insisted on calling that evidence the hearing could not finish in the week that the Board had allotted. If the case was put over, it could be many months before we got a decision. We decided to drop everything else in return for an early ruling on the appropriate bargaining unit. We dropped the issue of the sudden transfer of Hooper and Wong to Victory Square and their subsequent anti-union activities. The case of Chris in Ganges who had been fired and then, on the union's intervention reinstated, was held over until July. The question of which positions within a branch should be included in the bargaining unit was also held over.

The Board announced that after lunch on Day Four the lawyers would begin their arguments on the appropriateness of the bargaining unit, whether the withdrawals should be accepted or disregarded by the Board, and whether SORWUC was a proper union.

That afternoon was supposed to start with Ian's argument. However, we weren't satisfied with our evidence on the constitutional problem. And the Board, in its remoteness, had not yet heard from a real live bank worker. We needed a witness from the UBW. We had originally planned to have Jackie testify about this and about anti-union activity at Victory Square. At the last minute, we realized that Ian didn't know the story of Jackie's job application at the Commerce. She had thought that the bank might discriminate against her for previous union activity, so although she accurately described her experience and qualifications, she had altered the specific jobs and employers in parts of her work history. This would surely be raised by the bank, her credibility as a witness could be affected, and the bank might try to use it as grounds for firing. Ian freaked out. Ian decided that I would testify instead. I freaked out.

I was really nervous. Mostly all I had to do was identify the notice and the minutes of our January membership meeting which showed that the UBW had discussed and approved the constitutional amendments and resolutions passed by the national convention. At first it seemed I might not even get to do that, since the bank's lawyer objected vehemently to such important evidence being introduced so late. However, it was determined that the Board would hear my evidence.

I was afraid that the bank's lawyers would try to use me to prove that bank workers were confused about what had happened with the constitution. Although I wasn't confused, it seemed likely that I would be after some cross-examination by the bank's lawyers. They did ask a few questions about quorums for meetings, and how long it takes for mail to be delivered in Vancouver, but I survived and (I'm told) didn't sound confused at all.

That was the last of the evidence. Now it was time for each lawyer to sum up his case. Ian went first on the question of the bargaining unit. He referred to banks in the U.S. which had been certified branch

by branch, as well as retail chains in the U.S. and Canada. He stressed that to implement the law that said bank workers had the right to unionize, the Board must establish a bargaining unit small enough that it would be physically possible for a union to sign up a majority of the employees. Again he raised the possibility of the province as a unit, and argued that the Bank had deliberately downplayed the role of the Regional Office by failing to call any of them as witnesses.

The bank's lawyer went on and on about how important banks are to the economy and to each and every individual. "We are talking about something that is very crucial to each and every person. We are talking about that person's property rights. We are not talking about the convenience of getting a service, whether it is transportation, whether it is mailing a letter, whatever form it may be otherwise. We are talking about your property rights, my property rights, and those of all Canadians. We are talking about our right to deposit money and, more particularly, our right to withdraw it. And if that right is at all prejudiced, my respectful submission is that confidence in our banking system, upon which our whole fiscal structure is predicated, will be badly undermined and seriously jeopardized."

He painted a terrifying picture of the effect of certifying branches or even regions. "Now again I ask the Board to forget we are sitting in this beautiful city and this beautiful province" (he was definitely uncomfortable being out of Toronto) "broaden our sights to the implications resulting from the chaos, the utter chaos that is inevitable if the concept advanced by my friend is adopted by this honourable board. ("My friend" was the union's lawyer! That's legal jargon.)

"... There are in excess of seventy-five operating divisions among the chartered banks. I ask the Board simply to test even that situation against sequential bargaining, sequential strikes. The impact on our economy. The impact on our people. Chaos is probably inadequate to describe the consequences of my friend's proposition within the magnitude of this situation and these figures."

According to the bank's lawyer, the evidence showed "a uni-system of banking, controlled in all aspects centrally, at the Head Office The branch is not a profit centre. It is not an independent unit. . . . Even grievances cannot be settled within the branch."

He made an impassioned plea for industry-wide bargaining (interesting in view of the position the banks later adopted in response to such proposals from us). "The advantages of this sort of centralized bargaining to labour, management and government, as well as to the public, are obvious to the public themselves. . . . How conceivably can an agreement be negotiated in these circumstances on the basis of a unit of the nature or natures proposed by the applicant? Further, I ask the Board to consider and place itself in both the union's position and management's position in the terms of the logistics, the costs, the difficulties attendant upon the very negotiation of a multiplicity of agreements; the difficulties of administration, the costs of administration to the parties, not management alone, the union as well, the administration of a multiplicity of units, of separate unit agreements.

... We are not talking about five or six units ranging from four to twenty. We are talking about potentially 7,000. We are talking about, potentially, 1700 in this bank alone. It is a monster. My friend's client would create a monster. . . . Think in terms of the difficulties if not the impossibility of turning a monster around after it has taken off on a multi-unit, multi-agreement, sequential strike work stoppage tangent."

He argued that branch by branch certification "would introduce horrendous implications . . . multiple unions, multiple units, spread across the country, hither and yon, beyond control." Apparently still not grasping the fact that banks are subject to the labour law and the orders of the CLRB, he told the Board, "you should not ask of a bank that it indulge in that kind of experiment."

He concluded by saying that "a national unit alone would be appropriate in all the circumstances."

Ian then had an opportunity to answer the bank. He was neither quite so passionate nor quite so unreasonable. "If you determine, with the greatest respect, that only a national unit is appropriate, you are, in effect, legislating. You are taking over a function that ought and does belong only to Parliament. For to make a determination of such a wide-sweeping and confining nature would be to make the Canada Labour Code as it relates to a huge number of employees essentially inoperative."

He said the union too would favour joint bargaining and consolidating bargaining units. "The union has no intention of standing still. It does not propose to hold on to one or two or however many branches it may obtain on certification applications. It wants to expand and to consolidate. The objectives are clear. It's in everyone's interest to try and get the largest bargaining unit possible." He stressed again that the Board could choose from a whole range of appropriate bargaining units, from the branch to the province.

We all went back to work in the banks, feeling frustrated that we hadn't been allowed to tell the Board about the outrageous activities of Hooper and Wong and other aspects of the anti-union campaign. But we felt that we done a good job of putting forward our case. Now, we had to wait for the Board's decision.

The Board members went back to Ontario to hear the CUBE applications for four bank branches near London, Ontario. They were to return to B.C. in July to hear evidence about who should be excluded from the bargaining unit, and about unfair labour practices.

The next two months seemed an eternity. We tried to prepare ourselves for any eventuality, and spent a lot of time speculating as to what the Board's ruling might be. Most bank workers seemed to be waiting for the Board to decide whether the branch was a unit and whether SORWUC was a union before they would join.

On June 14, 1977 we received the decision. The Board ruled that each branch was an appropriate bargaining unit. I remember being in the vault at work, giving the Loomis men the money parcels for the week. Also in the vault were a couple of supervisors, both active in the anti-union campaign. Jackie came running into the vault yelling "We

won! It's branch by branch!" I moaned, "Oh no! It can't be!" The supervisors moaned the same thing.

The Board had dismissed the bank's horror stories as follows: "We have decided that the single branch location of the Commerce encompasses employees with a community of interest and is an appropriate bargaining unit . . . The counter arguments of the employer are in large measure hypothetical fears that we find should not prevail over the tangible realities of the union's position."

We were jubilant that we had won, but also surprised and apprehensive. Would we really be able to organize branch by branch?

The days following the decision convinced us all that it was a great victory. The press was plastered with it. The union office was nutso. The phones rang all day long. It was so big and meant so much to so many bank workers and we had done it! We had done what everyone said was impossible. We were smug and self-righteous to the BIG members at Victory Square, and for the first time in months it was us who could gloat all over them.

Our organizing drive was booming, and we realized this was just the beginning. Although we still had to go through the July hearing, we knew we would be certified at some branches. We had to prepare for negotiations, and to be successful in negotiations we had to increase our organizing activity. We wrote the CLC in Ottawa, reported on our campaign and the decision, and asked for financial support. They replied that they would discuss it at their next meeting. That was the last we heard about that appeal, but donations from local unions affiliated to the CLC increased considerably following the Board's decision. At last everyone knew that it was possible to organize the banks.

Just before the decision, SORWUC signed its first contract in the finance industry. The employees at the Electrical Trades Credit Union had to take a strike vote and convince management they were prepared to act on it, but at last—six months after we were certified there—we had signed an excellent contract. The starting rate went from \$600 per month to \$875 per month for a thirty-three hour work week. We won improved vacations, job security, benefits for part-time employees and time off for union meetings. It was a great contract, and great timing for bank workers. The work of the credit union workers in writing up proposals and negotiating with their employer, made a big contribution to the preparation for negotiations in the banks.

*We have learned so much about union
You can't win a war if you're on your own
You've got to have friends who will walk beside you
Together we can win where we can't alone.*

—A new version of Holly Near's "Hang in There"

7 They'll Promise Us Anything

Just before the July hearings the full implications of the CKOY decision began to sink in. People at the CLRB offices kept talking about "CKOY" and our lawyer kept telling us to remember "CKOY". It meant that whether we had majorities in the branches, or whether we were in a vote situation would be determined as of the date of the July hearings. Therefore the petitions, letters of withdrawals and protests would be taken into consideration. This meant some applications could be rejected without even a vote where our membership had fallen below thirty-five per cent.

In response to the Court's decision about CKOY, the CLRB amended its regulations in March. When deciding whether a union had a majority in a bargaining unit, the Board would now disregard resignations from the union unless they were mailed within ten days following notice of the application for certification. The union would get copies of all correspondence, including the names of people who signed the petitions and letters. Previously people had been able to register opposition to the union anonymously. Now they would have to answer to their co-workers, and could be summonsed by the union to appear at a hearing. The union argued that these regulations should be applied retroactively to cover our applications. The Board ruled against us; they would consider resignations in determining whether the union had a majority in branches we had applied for before the regulations were changed.

It was our contention that if the Board was going to consider withdrawals they must also consider new memberships. Even if a branch had applied with less than a majority, if we could sign up a majority in the branch before the hearing then we should be certified without a vote.

The union office became even more frantic. Some of the branches were very close to majorities. We needed to make sure not only that members' dues were paid up-to-date, but that copies of all receipts were available for the CLRB. We were madly rushing around, not only signing up new branches but trying to sign up all the new employees in old branches.

The hearings were held July 7 to 14 and were to determine who would be excluded from the bargaining units and whether or not we had a majority in each branch. We had twenty-two applications before the Board by this time, having applied for another two since the first hearing. Different banks argued the exclusion of secretaries, stenos and dicta-typists, loans officers, part-time employees, branch officers in-

training, teller trainees and management trainees. The Board decided that only management trainees should be excluded. (Even though it was practically unheard of for the Court to overturn such technical decisions by the Board, the banks appealed the decisions on exclusions. The appeals were dismissed by the Court, but they did have the effect of diverting time, energy and money from organizing). The Board ruled that we had majorities in five branches and certified us for those. Votes were ordered in seventeen, even though we had a majority in some of them. Thirteen new applications were made between June and September, 1977 when the votes were counted, including two in Saskatchewan.

During our campaign for the votes, it was too tense to hold meetings so we wrote or called people at home. Union supporters gave us the names and addresses or phone numbers of employees who might be convinced to vote for the union. One of the problems was that the union people in the branches were too scared to do the arguing themselves. The anti-union employees were also phoning people at home. Taking a coffee break in those days was a nerve-wracking ordeal. There was no telling what vicious nasty argument would be going on in the staff room. Branch managers were holding meetings telling us that our wages and benefits would probably be frozen if we were certified, and in addition to the banks' rules we would be subject to union rules and regulations, and we would have to start punching a time clock. Of course, the banks' customers weren't going to be left out either. Customers would tell us how proud they were to be dealing with a union branch, that we deserved better wages and they were pleased that we were finally standing up for ourselves. There were also the million dollar accounts who threatened to pull out of the branch if the union won. We were feeling quite battered.

The votes were held in early August. The ballot box was set up in the staff lounge, coffee room or conference room in each branch. We had to find people to scrutinize votes all over the province. The branch managers scrutinized for the bank.

From August 3 to August 25, seventeen votes were held. We lost fourteen. Our press statement said we were not surprised; we had expected to lose those votes because of the length of time that had elapsed between the application date and the date of the vote. There was a short article in the paper saying "Fledgling Union Flounders". At the time we were announcing a new application for certification every week and we were still exclaiming about our victory in the branch-by-branch decision so the press did not dwell on the vote losses.

Of the Commerce branches, we were automatically certified for Port McNeill and votes were ordered in seven others. As the anti-union employees were most active in the Commerce, we thought we'd lose them all. We won one at the Ganges branch. Everyone there had been so secretive about how they were going to vote in order to avoid harassment that when we called the branch to offer congratulations we had no idea who to ask for! At the Port Hardy branch the vote was tied four to four—this was counted as a loss, as exactly fifty per cent is not

a majority. At Victory Square, the vote was seventeen to two against the union. Dodie and Jackie in a fit of sarcasm kept asking everyone who had voted in favour of the union.

We lost the vote in our only application for a TD branch.

To this day we have no idea why the Board ordered votes at our Scotia branches. The Board has the power to make such arbitrary decisions and we never got a good explanation for it. We had applied with majorities at all and their dues were paid up. We lost one of the votes in the branches and we got clobbered in the vote at the Scotia Data Centre.

We had applied with less than a majority at the Scotia Data Centre and never managed to build an organization. The months waiting for the certification vote had been difficult. Management had wasted no time in starting their anti-union campaign and carried it on until the vote. An assistant supervisor had called a meeting in the lunch room and told the other employees that she was being transferred to Toronto so it didn't concern her but it was her opinion that they did not need a union and shouldn't join the UBW. An administration officer had waited for employees in the parking lot and approached them with a petition. One employee said that she read it, but it was a lot of legal gobbledey gook to her so she asked the administration officer what it meant. The administration officer said if she was having second thoughts about joining the union she should sign the petition. The employee said she knew her own mind and walked away but unfortunately that wasn't true of most of the employees. (This employee quit because of illness in the family and when she reapplied she could not get back on. She has ten years experience.)

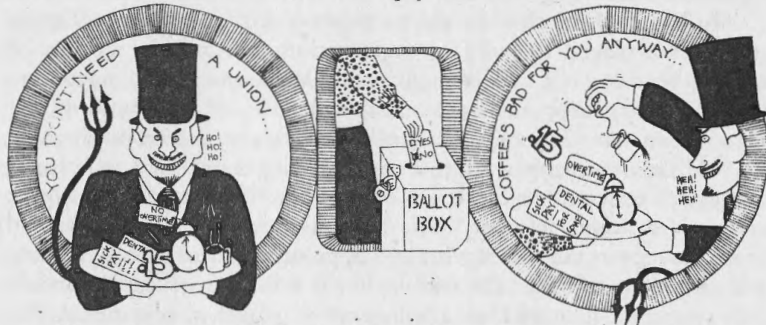
Some employees had been invited to attend a meeting which they were led to believe was a pro and con meeting with just Data Centre employees. It was held at a restaurant and conducting the meeting was the administration officer and Bonnie Wong. Wong said that the UBW was \$100,000 in debt and only wanted their membership fees to pay off this debt. She said she couldn't sleep at night because she was being threatened and her car was being followed and someone was trying to kill her. This sounded like something out of "The Godfather", but to the bank workers who knew nothing about unions it was frightening.

The week before the certification vote, management had informed employees that they would be receiving a fifteen cents per hour increase, a regular coffee break and no more overtime. They had earlier received the dental plan and sick pay. The employees would be paid sick pay if they were sick on their scheduled night. The vote was seventy-two to twenty against the union.

Immediately after the vote, management told employees that the coffee break wouldn't work out because it would conflict with the Loomis pickup and computer time. They were also told that the fifteen cents per hour increase was only if their production increased. As for no more overtime, the day after the votes were counted we were once again required to work involuntary overtime. So much for verbal promises and no union.

There were several members of BIG at the Data Centre. They did

not restrict their activities to the Data Centre. One of them phoned the Scotia branch in Haney, a small town about sixty-five kilometres east of Vancouver, to tell the employees that should they "go union" the Data Centre was already preparing to shut down the branch. The women in Haney were terrified for their jobs. Still, it was hard to believe that people who had been so strong for so long would believe the anti-union propaganda and vote against the union. We lost the vote at Haney and won at the Vancouver Heights and SFU branches of the Scotia.



We were automatically certified at four Bank of Montreal branches and votes were conducted in the other five. These votes were the most upsetting because they were so close. At the Main and Hastings branch in Vancouver it was ten to nine against the union, at Cloverdale thirteen to twelve against and at Main Branch in Nanaimo eighteen to eighteen. We knew how closely divided the branches were but we had hoped the scales would tip our way. We were never again so naive. Luck has nothing to do with winning.

Although the votes were held over a three week period they were all counted on September 1 and 2 at the Board offices.

That Friday evening several of us ended up drinking in a lounge on the North Shore. Union supporters came to console us. There were Dodie and Jackie being analytical and academic while they explained why we had lost all those votes. Really, it made sense—the wait, the intimidation, the turn-over. Of course we would lose all those votes. In some branches we had been strong as individuals but we had not acted collectively. We weren't used to working together. In those branches where we were able to act collectively the union majority had been retained. In the Port McNeill, Port Alberni and Regina branches, we had acted like a union from the beginning—even without a contract. We had elected a shop steward immediately, told the manager who she was and as things came up about our jobs or the union, management had to deal with our representatives who spoke for the collective. Also in these branches, encouragement and moral support from other trade unionists helped people in the struggle. Since the branch-by-branch decision, there was a new strategy. We would only apply for those branches where a majority had signed up into the union. We had applied for ten more branches since the decision on the bargaining unit. We knew the rules now. There should be few losses now. It all made sense. Then how come we felt so overwhelmed?

*I saw the banks' own tellers
Working hard for small return
While the bankers get more profits
That they never toiled to earn.*

—An additional verse to "Banks are
Made of Marble", traditional labour song

8 Organizing the Sunshine Coast

Following the CLRB decisions in the summer of 1977 there was a burst of organizing. Now, we said, the question of a union in the banks is no longer a matter for the Board but for the bank workers themselves. Hundreds of bank workers responded.

On the Sechelt Peninsula, we signed up a majority in three of the seven bank branches and came close in a fourth. Events on the Peninsula over the next year were like a microcosm of the bank organizing campaign as a whole. Bank management in this area tried every possible means to defeat the union. Union members, with strong community support, put up a great fight.

The Peninsula, with a population of about 14,000, is a rural/industrial/tourist area which can only be reached from Vancouver by water. The major industries are the pulp mill, fishing and logging. The CPU, the IWA, the UFAWU and the B.C. Ferry and Marine Workers Union are all strong.

Our first application for certification was on July 5, 1977 for employees of the Royal Bank in Sechelt. This application received the usual attention from the bank's Regional Office. Two personnel officers came to the branch to meet with employees. They asked for questions, asked to hear about any problems, and told employees to contact them in Vancouver if there were any problems.

At the time we were signing up members on the Peninsula, OTEU, the B.C. name of the Office and Professional Employees International Union mailed leaflets to bank branches in B.C. The OTEU is the CLC affiliate which, according to the CLC, had the "jurisdiction" to organize banks. (One of the objectives of the CLC is "to define the organizing jurisdiction of the affiliates", that is, the industry or occupation which each affiliate union is to organize. The CLC attempts to protect the jurisdiction of each affiliate against other affiliates and against independent unions who aren't bound by the CLC's division of jurisdiction. The CLC constitution says: "It shall be the responsibility of the officers, affiliates and chartered bodies of this Congress to actively encourage the elimination of conflict and duplicating organizations of jurisdiction through agreement, merger and other means.") But once the UBW got started, the OTEU demanded that the CLC affiliates support them rather than SORWUC because "we've had a jurisdiction to organize banks for forty years"! It may be that in most branches the OTEU leaflets were filed by management in the garbage without being seen by bank employees. But in the Royal branches at Sechelt and

Gibsons, and in the Gibsons branch of the Bank of Montreal, management used this leaflet to their own advantage. At one branch, the leaflet was circulated by management for all employees to initial, hardly the usual response to union literature! At another branch, the accountant passed the leaflet around and urged employees to investigate the OTEU before deciding which union to join. This approach was successful at the Royal in Sechelt. All but one employee signed a letter resigning from the union. The one exception was the main union organizer in the branch who had gone on vacation right after the application for certification was submitted. (Bad timing!) We were forced to withdraw this application. Management's communications were so good by this time that our members in the Royal in Gibsons were informed that the Royal in Sechelt had withdrawn from the union before it even happened! We never did get a majority at the Bank of Montreal.

Applications for certification for employees of the Commerce and the Royal in Gibsons went to the Board on July 13, 1977. The Gibsons branch of the Commerce is in a shopping mall so it's open on Saturdays and closed on Mondays. There were five employees plus the manager and an accountant when we applied for certification. Four out of the five joined the union. They had decided to organize for basically the same reasons bank workers all over the province were joining the union: they felt they were skilled workers and terribly underpaid. The staff in this branch socialized with each other after business hours and got along well with their manager. They recognized that he was powerless to change the basic working conditions and benefits which were established by Regional Office or Head Office. Other working people on the Peninsula made twice as much money as they did and they knew that people had fought for and won those rights and conditions by joining together in unions. Obviously, that was what was needed in the banks.

On Wednesday, July 13, the union office called the branch and told the accountant that the union had applied for certification that day. The manager was called back from his vacation. He arrived in the branch Thursday morning, stayed briefly and then went to Regional Office in Vancouver.

On Friday afternoon, the manager and the accountant spoke to employees individually. The manager told employees that he felt sick about the fact that they had joined the union, that they should have talked to him about it, and that he hadn't been able to sleep since it happened. The accountant said that the manager's career was over.

On Saturday morning at 9:30 a.m., the manager called the employees in to the coffee room for a meeting. He said he had decided that if the bank wouldn't transfer him, he would resign. He would apply for a transfer, but he didn't think the bank would transfer him. The only employee who hadn't joined the union asked if there was anything they could do to get him to stay. The manager said there was nothing anyone could do. The manager and two employees were in tears. Two employees were thinking of quitting the branch. Everyone felt terribly guilty for destroying the manager's vacation and probably his whole career.

At the time we thought the manager had unfortunately taken the whole thing personally, and was particularly upset because he had been called back from vacation. We did not think that it was part of a strategy for dealing with the union. It was much later that we read this report of a rumour in the *Financial Post*:

CONFIRM OR DENY: That Canada's major chartered banks have held talks with a professional labor fighter from Chicago who is advising them on methods to help stave off unionization of their 140,000 employees.

On another front, some bank managers apparently have been given "canned" speeches to their present staffs, complete with "built-in" pauses where the managers are supposed to get emotional.

We considered filing an unfair labour practice complaint about the meeting. We decided it would be more useful to put our energy into providing information and support to our Gibsons members so that we could maintain our majority in each branch through the crucial ten-day period. (According to the CLRB regulations, employees who withdrew from the union within ten days of the posting of the notice of certification application, would not be counted as members. That meant the bank and/or anti-union employees had ten days in which to campaign to convince people to quit the union. If they were successful, the union would lose majority support and be forced to withdraw the application for certification.)

We had some great meetings in Gibsons. At one meeting, the accountants from both the Royal and the Commerce were there as well as a "senior loans officer" (the Royal's name for an assistant manager), along with most of the members of the bargaining units in the branches where we had applied. Practically all the anti-union arguments imaginable were raised at this meeting and answered by the Gibsons union members and a SORWUC rep from Vancouver.

Everyone was given copies of various leaflets, a report on the July hearings regarding exclusions, copies of the union constitution, and copies of the contract between SORWUC and the Electrical Trades Credit Union. One of the employees presented a list of written questions which set off a great discussion.

The way some of the questions were presented made them sound more like a test than a request for information, but they raised a lot of important issues. One problem was bank workers seeing the union as an outside entity that would do things for them, rather than an organization of bank workers doing things for themselves. There was the problem of transfers and transferability of seniority, which we later had a hard time dealing with in negotiations on a branch-by-branch basis. Some bank workers feared they would lose more than they would gain, i.e. they wouldn't be able to go home early when their work was done; they wouldn't get any more wages because of the AIB; they might lose other benefits. The questions also reflected a suspicion of unions—we were accused, for instance, of paying union leaders both too much and too little all in the same breath.

We did withstand the ten days. At the Commerce branch the manager had not been transferred, and had not resigned. Neither had any of the employees. We were certified on August 16. In the Royal the anti-union campaign continued. A number of non-union employees wrote to the Board expressing opposition to the union and asking for a vote.

Certification at the Royal was delayed by legal hassles. Once the Board had made its decision that a branch was an appropriate bargaining unit, we were confident there would be no more long waits for certification. When we applied for the Royal in Gibsons, the bank's reply said they did not agree that the branch was an appropriate unit but they were not about to argue the point. However, on August 10, they did. The bank wrote to the Board and said they had new evidence on the question of the branch as the bargaining unit. The new evidence was a clipping from the Montreal Gazette datelined Toronto which quoted Jackie Ainsworth in Vancouver to the effect that the union was asking for joint bargaining in the banks. The banks produced this as evidence that even the union didn't think the branch was an appropriate unit. Although the Board had originally decided not to hold a hearing about the Gibsons certification, the Royal Bank insisted. The largest chartered bank in Canada was not prepared to accept union certification without its own "day in court".

The hearing on the Gibsons application was held October 18, 19 and 20, 1977 in Vancouver. We expected the decision would apply to the branches in Kamloops and in Melfort, Saskatchewan. Two union members from the Royal in Gibsons had time off work to attend the hearings.

Unlike the other banks who had asked the Board to establish a Canada-wide bargaining unit, the Royal asked for a regional unit. They also argued that the stenographer and the personal loans officer should be excluded from the unit, and that the application should be rejected because a majority of employees in Gibsons did not support the union.

The personal loans officer in the branch appeared at the hearing representing the five employees who had signed the letter opposing the application for certification. She argued that personal loans officers had little in common with clerical employees in the branch and that she should not be included in the bargaining unit. The Board asked how then could she represent the other employees opposed to the union if they had so little in common, whereupon she admitted that she had a common interest in benefits. She also argued that a majority of employees did not support the union although only a minority had signed the letter. She claimed that people had joined the union because of misinformation and that the union had befogged people's minds because wine had been served at a meeting.

The Board's decision came down on November 3, 1977, almost four months after the union had applied for certification. We had won, a victory diluted by the time taken to achieve it.

*Well I'm tired of working my life away
And giving somebody else all of my pay
While they get rich on the profits that I lose
And leaving me here with the working girl blues.*

— "Working Girl Blues" by
Hazel Dickens and Alice Gerrard

9 Saskatchewan

Two tellers in the Royal Bank in Melfort, Saskatchewan, about 240 kilometres north-east of Saskatoon, got together in early 1977 to try to do something about wages and conditions in their branch. Their wages were barely enough to cover basic living expenses. The starting wage in banks was often the minimum required by the Federal law, which was lower than the Saskatchewan provincial minimum wage! One of the tellers had been promised a certain starting wage and turned down another job to work at the branch only to find that her first pay cheque was significantly smaller than promised. Her complaints were ignored. Promised holidays would be denied at the last minute for arbitrary reasons. Deductions were made from pay cheques to pay for soda pop in the coffee room without the employees' permission. The manager was unapproachable and uninterested. The tellers had gone over his head to Regional Office to demand an investigation. Regional Office promised action and did nothing.

The two tellers began meeting with other women in their branch to discuss some kind of action. They met in secret, changing homes each time to be less obvious in the small community. After a few months of sharing concerns, they decided that to unionize was the only answer.

A friend in Regina, who had heard of SORWUC through the media and through friends, told the Melfort bank workers about it. They wrote to SORWUC for information and studied the material closely when it arrived. They then wrote again and said they were really interested and wanted to talk to someone from the union.

About this time the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour organized a conference for women trade unionists, and invited a speaker from SORWUC in Vancouver. This was an opportunity to meet with other trade unionists about support for the Melfort bank workers. If the people in Melfort joined the UBW there would have to be an independent organization formed in Saskatchewan. The Vancouver office had neither the time nor the money to organize and negotiate in another province. Women at the conference encouraged SORWUC to begin a campaign in Saskatchewan.

Saskatchewan has a history of struggle within the CLC to put the rights and interests of workers in Saskatchewan ahead of decisions by CLC leaders and national office leaders in Ontario. CUPE, the Grain Services Union and Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) had on occasion formed a dissident alliance within the

Saskatchewan Federation of Labour. Organizing the unorganized was part of their program. RWDSU had broken away from the international in 1971 and succeeded in building a strong Saskatchewan union. Because of this, the CLC expelled RWDSU but RWDSU's alliances with other unions continued, giving it a unique position of solidarity with the CLC affiliated unions as well as independence from CLC directives. RWDSU was actively organizing service, retail and restaurant workers.

In 1976 RWDSU had renewed its drive to organize the credit unions. Credit unions are more numerous in Saskatchewan than any other province except Quebec, and represent a significant portion of the finance industry. This organizing drive was only partly successful, with certifications in Saskatoon and Yorkton. As part of their anti-union campaign, the credit unions raised wages in non-union branches, putting bank wages behind those of credit unions. Bank management was meeting all across the province to figure out ways to prevent union interest among their workers without having to raise wages to the credit union levels. The credit unions and banks are located side by side in almost every city, town and village in the province. Bank workers began meeting to compare wages.

Melfort was one town in which the Royal Bank employees compared their wages and found that they were paid less than their friends in the credit unions and even in other Royal branches. Their initial interest in unionizing was what was needed to bring together a number of support groups and individuals in the province.

Jean Burgess had been working for the RWDSU on the credit union drive. She met with the SORWUC rep at the conference in Saskatoon and then visited the Vancouver office. She agreed to investigate the possibility of setting up a support organization for SORWUC in Saskatchewan. Her first step was to meet with the bank workers in Melfort. Burgess describes that meeting in August 1977 as very exciting:

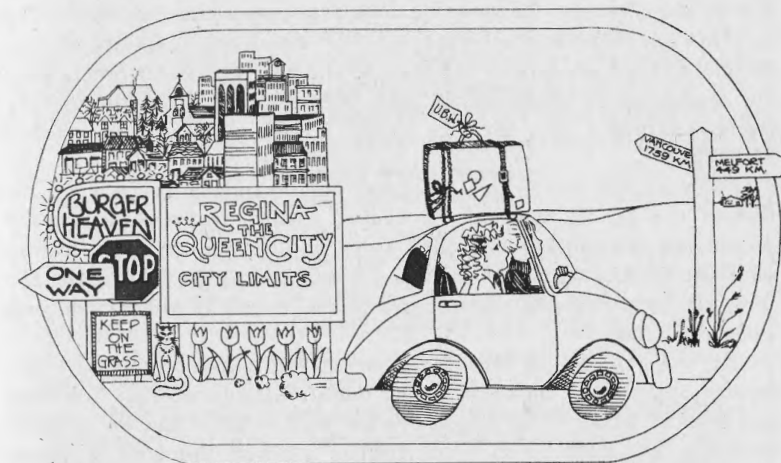
Six women from the branch attended. They told me what they wanted and I told them everything I knew about SORWUC. They were not only ready to sign union cards but to become active in setting up the union. They planned another meeting for the following week and invited other employees from the branch. I don't think any of us knew what we were getting into as far as demands on time and energy were concerned. We were all pretty nervous about our ability to do what had to be done. But we did know that if things were ever going to improve, we had to do it ourselves.

Events moved quickly after this. In August 1977 SORWUC National sent Jean Rands to Saskatchewan for a week to help set up supporting committees in Saskatoon and Regina. Jean Burgess was to coordinate the provincial campaign with the objective of laying the base for a bank workers' union. Others in the committees took on various tasks, from organizing leafletting to fund-raising. The committee

members from both cities had a wide range of experience. A few were active union members, others were working in non-union jobs, some were feminists, some were students and a few had previously worked as bank tellers. The committee members saw themselves as supporters of the union, not as its decision-makers.

Rands and Burgess met with representatives of RWDSU, CUPE, Grain Services Union, the IWA, and the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour and found a lot of support for SORWUC's campaign in the banks. RWDSU later provided the UBW with a phone in their office. Gail Powell, who worked there, was active in organizing bank workers in Regina and helping us with grievances and negotiations. The meeting with the rep of the Office and Professional Employees International Union was brief and unfriendly. The OPEIU was not prepared to organize bank workers in Saskatchewan; it was prepared, however, to oppose such efforts by SORWUC. This was a hint of what was to follow with regard to CLC opposition.

A majority of the employees at the Royal's Melfort branch joined the union and on August 26, 1977 SORWUC applied for certification. The Saskatchewan UBW drive was underway.



While the Melfort members anxiously waited for the notice of their application to be received by the bank, the organizing campaign was set in motion in Regina and Saskatoon. A mass leafletting of each branch in each city was undertaken. In Regina there was an immediate response. A meeting of workers at the Scotia Main branch was arranged and within a week of hard organizing work a majority had signed union cards. The union applied for certification for this second branch, the first main branch in the country, on September 2, 1977. Both committees received many calls from bank workers; interest was high. Union membership increased, but we were not able to sign up a majority in any other branch.

Union locals were informed of our activities. We asked them for