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CANADIAN FEMINISM TODAY

GETTING ORGANIZED

...in the Feminist Unions

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Rather than fight in the women's committees and caucuses of male-dominated unions, some women in the west of Canada have sought a different strategy - the organization of feminist unions. The Service, Office and Retail Workers Union of Canada (SORWUC) and the Association of University and College Employees (AUCE), organized primarily by women around feminist principles, have fought for their lives over the last decade. They maintain that only a women-centred union can effectively organize and fight for the large numbers of unorganized women in the service sector of the economy. SORWUC developed a high profile in the Seventies as the small gutsy union that took on the banks. Both SORWUC and AUCE have considered joining the CLC. But the terms for their admission to this trade union central have always been the dissolution of the union and the merger of various segments into other unions. This article, written by women from both unions, demonstrates the significance of feminist unions and explains why AUCE and SORWUC continue to fight for the right to be independent trade unions.

GETTING ORGANIZED IN THE FEMINIST UNIONS

THE MESSAGE OF the women's movement has always been that "no-body can do it for us"; that women have the skills, competence and ability to organize to fight our oppression. The Association of University and College Employees (AUCE) and the Service, Office and Retail Workers Union of Canada (SORWUC), both independent feminist unions, are concrete examples of this struggle.

As clerical workers, our employers may look awesome and all-powerful, and we sometimes see ourselves as "just tellers," "just typists" and "just women." But we are not inherently less valuable or less skilled or even less powerful than other workers. When clerical workers have the courage to organize and to strike, we have the power to win.

AUCE and SORWUC have records second to none in fighting for women workers in unorganized industry. Before clerical workers at the University of British Columbia (UBC) formed AUCE, they had already tried to organize through the Office and Professional Employees International Union (OPEIU) and through the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE). When organizing with OPEIU/OTEU in 1971-72 (in B.C., OPEIU is called the Office and Technical Employees Union, OTEU) they found that the professional union leaders assigned to UBC were a hindrance rather than a help. UBC clerical workers wrote leaflets about their pay and conditions and the need for a union at UBC, handed them to the OTEU business agents for distribution and never saw them again. The OTEU refused to give the UBC organizers a copy of the union constitution. When they finally got hold of the constitution, they were shocked at the powers of the international president and the provisions that allowed the international to replace elected local officers with appointed "trustees."

This article was originally published in Kinesis (September/October, 1980) as a defence of Association of University and College Employees (AUCE) and Service, Office and Retail Workers Union of Canada (SORWUC) as democratic unions of working women. As feminists and clerical workers, we were responding to an article advocating that AUCE should be absorbed by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE). (Since then, the AUCE membership voted in referendum in favour of AUCE and against joining another union.) This article was updated and submitted for this book because we feel that the debate about strategy for organizing women as workers is important to the women's movement as a whole.

When the OTEU campaign failed, the organizers looked at CUPE as an alternative. But CUPE's constitution is almost as undemocratic as OTEU's (in CUPE the national executive can replace local officers with a trusteeship) and its record at UBC in representing its own women members was poor. The wage gap between men and women who were covered by the CUPE contract was even greater than between unorganized men and women support staff!

UBC clerical workers concluded that our only hope for success was to organize our own independent union. We didn't want a union where power could fall to an elite few, where the majority of members are women but the appointed officials are men.

AUCE succeeded where CUPE and OTEU had failed. Beginning with UBC in 1972, AUCE went on to organize Notre Dame University, Simon Fraser University, Capilano College, Collège of New Caledonia and the teaching assistants at SFU. We won some of the best clerical workers' contracts in the country. We spent our time building our union without having to fight to convince conservative union business agents or a male-dominated union executive in Ottawa or New York.

SORWUC was also formed in 1972 and has enthusiastically organized small units of day care workers, social service workers and clerical workers. In the restaurant industry, SORWUC has taken on viciously anti-union employers. At Muckamuck Restaurant in Vancouver, SORWUC maintained an effective picket line for over two years and paid strike pay the whole time. The union successfully fought injunctions, unfair labour practices, decertification attempts and an application for certification by a company union. In an industry where unions are often defeated by decertification or by loss of a strike vote, the strength and determination of the Muckamuck strikers is inspiring. In spite of the wealth and intransigence of Doug Christmas (the owner), the restaurant has been shut down since November 1980.

The conditions that led to the formation of AUCE and SORWUC still exist: most women workers are unorganized. Nearly all the growth in union membership among women is a result of public employee organizations achieving union status. The increase in the number of women union members has had no effect on the fact that the average woman earns just over half of the average man's wage; the wage gap between men and women is actually widening.

In 1981, clerical workers in CUPE made equal pay for clerical workers the main issue in the civic workers' strike in the Lower Mainland. The Vancouver Municipal and Regional Employees Union (VMREU), an independent union of inside (office) workers, played an important part in mobilizing support and counteracting the reluctance of CUPE staff to push the equal pay demand. The media, union members and thousands of office workers discussed whether it was possible and just for clerical workers to win "one base rate" to apply to labourers and clerical workers. In the end, the CUPE staff convinced one of their locals to accept a contract which *increased* the differential between the starting rate for outside labourers and the starting rate for clerical workers. This contract formed the basis of the settlement with the municipalities negotiating through the Greater Vancouver Regional District. The final settlement was a disappointment, but this strike and the campaign around equal pay were effective in popularizing the legitimate complaints of clerical workers. The civic workers' campaign, carried out in spite of the CUPE staff, convinced many clerical workers that they were entitled to compare their wages to wages outside our job ghetto. And many saw for the first time a possibility of fighting for our rights through union organization.

Clerical workers will join unions that challenge the wage differential between male and female workers. The hundreds of thousands of women workers in the job ghettos of the private sector have the power to do it, but it is a difficult battle. Some of the most powerful corporations in this country depend on the cheap labour of women for their profits. It is estimated that in 1974 women workers in Canada lost about \$7 billion in potential wage and salary income due to male-female inequalities. Our employers won't give up those profits without a fight.

The Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) can't organize working women because the people who run the CLC don't want to challenge that wage differential. They have no respect for our skills as clerical workers, and no respect for our right to run our own organizations. Democratic organizations of women workers are a threat to the stability of the organizations these bureaucrats administer. Often they actually oppose equal pay. For example, a CUPE business agent giving a stewards' seminar said that to demand that clerical wages be brought up to the base rate for general labourers would be an insult to general labourers.

This attitude is reflected in CUPE agreements. In the CUPE agreement with the District of Surrey which expired in 1980, mostly male outside workers got a second-year increase of 7.5 percent while the lower-paid clerical workers got only 7 percent.

The CLC's Union of Bank Employees in its organizing meetings and in its negotiations for bank workers takes the position that wages are not an issue in the banking industry. They say it makes sense to sign poor contracts to get "a foot in the door" or "a base to build from." But in fact, their contracts are used as an anti-union argument by management in unorganized bank branches. SORWUC was criticized for refusing to sign such contracts and for withdrawing from negotiations in 1978 when there were not enough bank worker members to win anything better. But the last three years have showed that SORWUC was right to say that contracts that provide for no wage increase could not be organizing tools or a base to build from. There are now only about 80 certified bank branches in the whole country (including those organized by the CSN in Quebec) and the CLC's Union of Bank Employees is not growing. As long as bank workers see that union branches get the same wages as non-union branches, they will not join a union in large numbers.

The total bargaining power of clerical workers would be substantially reduced if AUCE and SORWUC were to disappear. The idea that somehow we would all be stronger if we were all "united" in CUPE is the opposite of the truth. The fact that VMREU is an independent union made it possible for women inside CUPE to carry on a campaign for fair pay for clerical workers. If VMREU had not existed outside CUPE, that campaign would not have happened. If the bank workers' local of SORWUC had joined the CLC in 1978, under the terms specified by the CLC, we would be in no position now to revive aggressive organizing in the finance industry.

Those who opt for AUCE joining the CLC confuse the argument by using words like "merger" and "joining forces." They imply that AUCE will continue to exist as an independent democratic union, when in fact they propose that it cease to exist and be replaced by CUPE. The same kind of argument was used against the bank workers' local of SORWUC in 1977. Even though the CLC made it clear that SORWUC would cease to exist and be divided up among affiliates, people criticized SORWUC for not "affiliating" with the CLC.

Rather than attacking AUCE and SORWUC for being outside the "House of Labour," CLC supporters should criticize the CLC for excluding our unions. We should not have to give up our democratic constitutions and traditions, our feminist goals and our control of our own collective bargaining objectives — to meekly "merge" into another union like CUPE — in order to gain admission. This is the condition the CLC has put on our joining it. SORWUC should not be forced to divide itself among the affiliates designated by the CLC executive (restaurant workers to the Hotel and Restaurant Employees International Union; day care workers to CUPE; clerical workers to OTEU/OPEIU; agency homemakers to CUPE). Feminists who support the CLC should demand that they allow AUCE and SORWUC to affiliate as AUCE and SORWUC.

The argument against the independent feminist unions is one that has been traditionally used against the women's movement and its right to exist. Whenever we demand our own organizations we are accused of splitting the working class. It is a critical question for feminists: is it necessary for us to have our own organizations, our own independent power base, or can we win by influencing and infiltrating established male-dominated organizations?

While we support the struggle of women within the CLC, our immediate tasks are different. Our goals in AUCE and SORWUC are not the establishment of women's committees and caucuses within our unions. These are important and necessary in institutions like CUPE that are male-dominated, where women must struggle to have their voices heard, but they are not the final goal of feminists. Our objective is to build unions of working women controlled by working women, whereas the advocates of "merger" are prepared to destroy one such union in the interest of being able to participate in women's caucuses, committees and conferences within male-dominated unions.

Advocates of AUCE joining CUPE deplore the fact that debate on this issue has become increasingly heated. They patronizingly admonish us to "be sure we understand where and why we disagree." As women who have been on the left, the women's movement and the trade union movement for many years, we have all heard this "now, now, let's be reasonable" kind of argument before. Well, we are full of rage. We see our struggle for fair wage rates as clerical workers, for benefits

when we get pregnant, our very livelihoods, getting lost in an uncaring bureaucracy. We see control over our lives being handed to a male power elite. We see losing hard-won gains and starting our struggle over again at the bottom. We see standing up in union meetings to speak and being harassed by wolf-whistles from men union members. This is not just an intellectual or abstract debate to us, but a fundamental and gut issue.

The only way we can organize clerical workers into a force strong enough to win the contracts that we need and deserve is to organize and build unions that clerical workers control. We have had and will continue to have more impact on the labour movement and on our wages and working conditions as a women's union than as part of a CUPE women's committee. The reason for the creation of AUCE and SORWUC is the same as the reason for the creation of the present women's movement — we learned that in the trade union movement, as in the male-dominated left and in society at large, our concerns are treated as secondary.

One of the more seductive arguments of those who think AUCE should "dissolve" into CUPE is the question of "whether we have the resources to defend ourselves." They go on to attack what they call the AUCE tradition of volunteering, and state that this "excludes the involvement of working mothers." In fact, AUCE locals encourage membership participation by holding union meetings during working hours, rather than in the evening, and (in Local 6), by providing child care during union meetings.

Rather than proposing ways to make it easier for working mothers to participate effectively in decision-making in the union, the advocates of CUPE propose that we throw up our hands in despair and turn over the decision-making to experts appointed by the national office. There is no reason to believe that the use of highly-paid "professionals" to do the work of the union will encourage membership participation. One of the reasons that so many people distrust and dislike unions, and see them as corporate concerns, very much like "big business," is that union members have little or no say in the running of things. Members become alienated and cynical when they realize that their input is actually discouraged by the paid officials who have the "expertise."

This is hardly a situation that encourages the involvement of working mothers.

AUCE's union representatives are elected by and from the membership and paid at the same rate as their regular job, or at a rate in the collective agreement. In contrast, CUPE, which is held up to us as an example of democracy, hires its business agents through its national headquarters in Ottawa. The members of the local have no say in the hiring process. While being in CUPE may not necessarily mean more paid union staff, it does mean losing membership control over the paid union staff. For all 136 B.C. CUPE locals, there are only 17 staff reps, and of these 17, only 2 are women. In Canada, CUPE has 160 staff reps, of whom only 9 are women and 151 are men. AUCE, on the other hand, has 8 paid union reps, 7 of whom are women.

As examples of gains made by women workers, the advocates of CUPE point to the motions and resolutions passed at CLC, B.C. Federation of Labour and CUPE conventions calling for the inclusion of women's rights clauses in union contracts. Instead of going to conventions to fight for resolutions, AUCE and SORWUC feminists have been able to spend our time organizing our workplaces and fighting our employers for these rights on the job.

AUCE and SORWUC have won contract clauses giving women full pay for the period of unemployment insurance maternity leave (the employer is required to pay the difference between UIC benefits and the woman's regular salary). This clause was challenged by UIC and AUCE fought it through to the Federal Court of Appeal and won. AUCE Local Six, Teaching Support Staff Union at SFU, signed a first contract that includes compassionate leave for the death of a worker's "homosexual companion" and a clause giving members the right to fight sexual harassment through the grievance procedure. AUCE and SORWUC have won the right to have union meetings during working hours with no reduction in pay, in recognition that most of our members have two jobs — one for wages and the other at home — which make evening meetings impossible to attend and make membership involvement difficult. SORWUC has won clauses providing employer contribution to employees' day care costs, and clauses allowing for paid leave for children's illness and paid paternity leave. Most important, both AUCE

and SORWUC have always seen women's wages as a feminist issue and have fought hard for equal pay.

Those advocating that AUCE join CUPE will tell you that it is worth it to trade off control for "access to greater resources." It is dangerously naive to assume that because these resources (strike funds, professional staff, etc.) exist, they will be used in the interest of the local union membership. When the highly-paid male business agent who has never done clerical work in his life negotiates a contract for low-paid female clerical workers, is it likely that he will effectively represent their concerns, or even understand them? Is it likely, if they reject the deal he has negotiated, that he will recommend to the regional and national union executives (also well-paid, mostly male professionals) that strike funds be released to those workers? It is no wonder that AUCE's contracts are better than CUPE's. It is no wonder that CLC reps say bank workers' wages aren't an issue, and it is no wonder that with their multi-million dollar resources, they have failed to organize in the finance industry. Ultimately, the best and only effective resource that a trade union has is the unity and militancy of its members. The biggest strike fund in the world will not help if the members are not willing to fight, or if their union representatives sign sellout agreements behind their backs.

Women workers with the right to strike have the power to win some of the demands of the women's movement regarding child care, maternity benefits, economic independence, sexual harassment and discrimination against lesbians and gays. But the overwhelming majority of women are unorganized, and most of the minority who are union members are in bureaucratic unions dominated by men who discourage the fight for women's rights. In order to exercise our power, working women must build organizations that we control ourselves.

FURTHER READINGS

The Bank Book Collective. *An Account to Settle: The Story of the United Bankworkers (SORWUC)*. Vancouver: Press Gang Publishers, 1979.

GETTING ORGANIZED

... in the CCU

B Y S U E V O H A N K A



The Confederation of Canadian Unions was formed as a trade union central which would offer an alternative to the Canadian Labour Congress and the domination in the CLC of the large international unions whose head offices were far from the action in Canada. Sue Vohanka argues that the reason the CCU has put women workers in the forefront and fought for them is because the unions of the CCU are rank and file controlled unions. She details the issues that the CCU has fought around - most notably the fight for equal pay for work of equal value that CAIMAW workers (both men and women) fought for in the Kenworth plant in Vancouver - in its continuing struggle for equality in the workplace.