

# Small B.C. union is busy organizing women bank workers

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VANCOUVER — A mere thousand women are involved, but Canada's most powerful corporations are taking notice and the country's house of labor is scrambling to catch up.

Ignoring its small numbers and scant budget, the Service, Office and Retail Workers Union of Canada (SORWUC) is trying to organize those long ignored by the Canadian Labor Congress — women in retail stores, offices, restaurants, and especially banks.

Pausing only long enough to win a precedent-setting

decision in June from the Canadian Labor Relations Board allowing individual branches of the 11 chartered national banks to be organized as bargaining units rather than all branches of a bank in one unit, SORWUC signed up, at last count, 25 branches. The B.C.-based union even organized two branches in Saskatchewan.

And a new branch is being added nearly every week.

The CLC, taken by surprise at this independent union's success, eyed the 145,379 bank workers in 7,000 branches across the country that might well be organized outside its fold and then in September hastily assembled a bank employees' organizing committee with a \$1-million fund at its disposal. But the feisty SORWUC isn't worried about the competition.

Heather MacNeil is the office co-ordinator of the United Bank Workers, the section of SORWUC that is organizing bank workers. One of the two paid employees of the union, she's convinced that SORWUC will continue to lead the field, despite the power and war chest of the CLC, because SORWUC is committed to organizing the unorganized, democracy and local control, and the equality of women.

Those phrases have long been bandied about by most unions, but SORWUC's constitution and actions prove the difference. SORWUC has not only begun organizing the banks, but also has day-care centres, restaurants, and

legal offices to its credit. All positions with the union are elected, no official can serve more than one year, and no officer can be paid more than the highest paid person in the bargaining unit. SORWUC's national president, Jean Rands, is paid \$600 a month and Miss MacNeil receives \$700 a month.

"Our philosophy is that control rests with the membership. Our policy on union officers prevents a bureaucracy from developing. The local bargaining units decide what they want in a contract and then they negotiate for it. Union officials won't even meet with an employer unless the employees are present. The union will give advice and share information from past organizing experiences, but it is up to the members to do the actual organizing and bargaining," Miss MacNeil said.

Democracy, she insists, is not just an important principle. "It's the only way to organize in a new industry employing large numbers of women. The only way women in the banks are going to join a union is if they organize

themselves, run the union, and have control over the negotiations. It's a principle, but it's also practical."

It was that kind of thinking that first led to the creation of SORWUC as an independent union in 1972. "A number of women had frustrating experiences with existing unions, such as seeking help to organize a small restaurant and being told the unit was too small to bother, or a union sending in a male organizer with slick campaign material to tell the women how they should organize an office. We concluded that the traditional unions were either not able or not willing to organize women workers," Miss MacNeil explained.

By 1973, SORWUC won its first certification in a small legal office and during 1974 and 1975 signed up 14 social service agencies, day-care centres, and offices for a total of 150 members. SORWUC members consider key clauses in those first contracts to be full pay for maternity leave, two weeks paternity leave with pay, a longer lunch break once a month for union meetings, and a ban on boss-

es' requiring employees to perform personal services such as bringing coffee and doing personal errands. The drive to organize the banks began in 1976.

Miss MacNeil said that SORWUC's success thus far has proved the point. "The women we talk to are interested primarily in two things about unions: will they have to go on strike and will they have to do what union officials tell them to do. If SORWUC was like most other unions and set the rules for members, we'd never convince them to join."

Though SORWUC prides itself on being different from the mainstream labor movement, it has allies within the CLC. SORWUC's organizing drives and \$20,000 bill for legal representation before the CLRB are being paid for by large donations from CLC affiliates, including the International Woodworkers of America, the B.C. Government Employees Union, the Pulp and Paper Workers of Canada and the Union of Municipal and Regional Employees, as well as members' initiation fees of \$3 each and dues which average about \$5 a month per person.

In fact, SORWUC doesn't outright reject eventual affiliation with the CLC. "We would be willing if we were ensured that our constitution would remain intact and that we would be allowed to organize work places where women make up the majority. However, the CLC has indicated that this would create jurisdictional problems and that to join, we might have to merge with another union or become a direct local of the CLC rather than a national organization on a par with other unions," Miss MacNeil said.

SORWUC claims it welcomes the CLC's efforts to organize bank workers, but members accuse CLC affiliates of concentrating their efforts only where SORWUC is active.

Charlotte Johnson, president of the United Bank Workers section, said that "the Office and Technical Employees Union and the United Steelworkers of America have contacted our organizing committees in B.C. and Saskatchewan about joining them. It confuses the bank workers. It's upsetting for, after all, there are eight other provinces waiting to be organized."

Miss Johnson said SORWUC has requested financial aid from the CLC's fund to organize bank workers. "We say fine if they want to give money to their own affiliates first, but we think that if they're serious about getting bank workers into unions, they should help us too."

But the odds are against SORWUC. John Simons, executive secretary of the CLC, said that "we are not in the habit of making donations to organizations outside the CLC. However, any request for financial assistance has to be decided by the executive council, which has not yet considered the matter."

Edward Johnston, director of organization for the CLC, said that "SORWUC is not really a bank workers' organization. But we've encouraged the United Bank Workers to participate in the national campaign." However, Mr. Johnston indicated that to do so, the section would have to affiliate with the CLC. "In addition, they would have to be prepared to allow the workers they've organized a free choice whether to stay with them or join the new organization of bank workers that will be formed. They have asked for money to do as they will, to build their own organization. That's different than building a national organization of bank workers."

The 16 unions comprising the CLC's bank organizing committee are at present organizing bank workers into their own unions "as a holding operation until an organization is established and the bank workers can make their own decisions," Mr. Johnston said.

The dispute comes full circle. To receive money, SORWUC or the bank workers' section must affiliate with the CLC. But to affiliate might well mean dissolving or changing the union, and SORWUC isn't about to do that. National president Jean Rands said that the bank workers' section has every right to secede and take its assets and records with it. "But there is no indication

that they want to do that and I see no reason for them to do it."

Miss Rands said that SORWUC has written to the CLC about both participation on the bank organizing committee and affiliation, "but they've ignored our letters requesting that discussions be held. We've not heard any concrete proposals officially or in writing."

In the meantime, SORWUC and the banks have begun negotiations for a first contract for the branches now signed up. Members voted by referendum ballot to bargain for a starting salary of \$1,140 a month, a figure based on what they consider the minimum needed to support a woman with one dependent (starting salaries now average about \$600 a month), four weeks' vacation after one year, benefits for part-time workers, and strong seniority provisions, which they describe as key to eliminating sex discrimination in promotion procedures.

Though the public spotlight is on the battle over the banks, SORWUC is also heading up the first strike at a neighborhood pub in British Columbia and negotiating a first contract at another neighborhood pub. Miss MacNeil maintains that "it's a wide-open field. Women are calling us all the time."

Margot Holmes, spokesperson for striking workers at the Bimini pub, is a prime example. She said that the employees contacted six unions before deciding to join SORWUC. "The decision was based on the fact that we could write our own contract, the union prevents a bureaucracy from developing, and it's small and Canadian, so we didn't feel overwhelmed. And they let us do the organizing."

Once the strike is over, Miss Holmes said that "many of us will volunteer to help SORWUC organize other pubs and restaurants. SORWUC encouraged us to take an active role in our lives, and taught us how. That made us more confident about standing up for our rights. And for other's rights."

With only two full-time paid employees, SORWUC relies heavily on volunteers. More than 200 volunteers are organized into a leaflet brigade to inform bank workers of SORWUC activities, and many were called on to help picket Bimini pub.

The Bimini strike is another illustration of SORWUC's uneasy relations with the established union movement. In the midst of the strike, Local 40 of the Hotel, Restaurant, Culinary and Bartenders' Union applied for certification to represent the workers. When SORWUC picketed the bartenders' union's offices, crying foul for signing up workers who had been crossing the picket line, the B.C. Federation of Labor stepped in and threatened to expel the bartenders' union if it didn't withdraw its application.

The next day, Len Guy, the federation's secretary-treasurer, announced that Local 40 had withdrawn its application, adding that affiliates of the federation "place picket lines and trade union principals ahead of their own vested interests." However, Mr. Guy also said that the pub is considered in the bartenders' union's historic and established jurisdiction.

Miss Holmes' retort to that statement on jurisdiction sums up what SORWUC is all about. "They claim they have had jurisdiction since 1900, which means that they've had 77 years to organize women. And where were they?"