

2

Depression

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I do all the work there is while you raise all the Cain,  
E'vry time I look at you, woman, you give me a pain,  
You can yell like bloody murder, You've got me in a spot,  
But, some day, I'm going to yell right back,  
Sister, you ain't so hot.

The Revolt of Lucy the Housemaid.<sup>1</sup>

By 1939, there were 1,121 organized women workers in British Columbia, out of a female working population of approximately 26,000.<sup>2</sup> Although small in numbers, these women made a significant contribution to both the trade union movement and to the general spirit of working class combativity of the 1930's. In order to comprehend the hardships which these women and faced in organizing<sup>v</sup> their relative isolation from the labour movement: it is necessary to place these women's experiences within the social and economic context of the Canadian Depression.

The experience of women within the trade union movement and as workers facing exploitation within their work places must be approached from the double location of women's experience within capitalist society. Women play the central role within the home in reproducing labour power, but also play a role as wage labourers, production. These two distinct functions developed for Canadian working class women with the industrialization of the Canadian economy, (a process which varied from region to region). Previous to this, the family, despite the sexual division of labour within it, served as a basic production unit. With the development of capitalism, the production of goods and services was brought outside the home and socialized. Women continued to play the key role in domestic production: childrearing; (daughters as well as mothers participated in this); maintenance of the home, cooking, cleaning and facilitating the daily and generational reproduction of labour power.<sup>3</sup>

In periods of economic expansion, women were drawn out of the home and integrated into production, only to be released again with the decline in production. This occurred on both a seasonal and cyclical basis. The central position of women on the labour market became that of a 'reserve army of labour'.<sup>4</sup> A small layer of women worked permanently until they married. The jobs available to women outside of the home were extensions of their work within the family. Women's affinity for such work was perceived as natural. Thus women worked in laundries, restaurants, schools, in food production, and as domestics.

Women's work within the family was unpaid and seen as non-productive and unskilled. Thus, these categories were relatively devalued within the labour market. Both male and female attitudes towards women's labour were moulded by this distorted reality. The right of women to employment outside the home was thus, continually, challenged, by both objective pressures and the dominant ideology.

The position of women in the labour force created objective constraints on organization. Women were temporary, seasonal and part-time workers. Women often worked in individual households, or cottage industry. The superexploitation of women's labour power created special needs (Minimum Wages and conditions), issues which skilled tradesmen had long resolved. The primary role which women played in the family at times made it difficult for them to play more of a role in union work. Attitudes surrounding 'feminine' behavior created additional barriers. A central obstacle against female union activity was the disinterest in the organization of working women shown by the labour movement. Many unionists believed that women were 'backwards'. Essential elements which could interest and facilitate women's unionization were lacking (childcare was not provided for meetings, women's rights were reduced to general union rights). *they shouldn't work*

This general explication of working class women's experience in this period must be situated within the specific national and regional experience of British Columbia and Canada. This specificity designates aspects of ideological and material experience which could facilitate or retard women's militancy.

As well, any discussion of working class women must move into a general discussion of working class experience at this time, despite the divisions of the proletariat along sexual lines. The brutal economic and social attacks on working women in the 1930's were often experienced by other vulnerable sectors (youth, immigrants) and were translated into a challenge to the rights of all workers, both skilled and unskilled. Divisions along organizational and ideological lines within the working class in response to these attacks swept along working class women as well as men. The polarization between craft and industrial unionism, between revolutionary and reformist consciousness; and between business and political unionism, played a role in the development of women's consciousness. Women were organized by unions because they were in numerically important sectors; they were organized as potential revolutionaries with a role to play within their own class. Equally, women could remain unorganized if they were in an all female job ghetto, or outside of a strategic sector, unless they themselves took the initiative and unionized.

Once women became active, they were often very militant, putting to flight the myth of women's 'backwardness'. Perhaps this was because they had so little to lose and so much to gain:

Her mouth tightened again. "And d'ya think it's easy for me? If I'm workin' what do I get? Twenty bucks a week. And rent to come out of that, and clothes, and carfare. And seven dollars for Tommy's keep."

The world Depression had a devastating effect on the Canadian economy, second only to the decline of the American economy. The downturn was prolonged and severe until 1933; the recovery, uneven. The central factors which shaped this crisis for Canada were its dependency on outside investment (the United States purchased 38% of Canadian products, the United Kingdom, 22%); the dependency on vulnerable primary exports, such as pulp, wheat, pulpwood, flour, newsprint and non-ferrous metals. Canada maintained a high level of imports, including capital goods. Heavy investment was necessary in order to develop such a large country, with a small population base.

The international downswing struck Canada after the 1920's had seen intense speculation in new industrial developments. Major domestic investment was centered in manufacturing, housing, public works, agriculture, rail and telegraphs and utilities; with lower investment in pulp and mining. The highly concentrated nature of many of these sectors created further vulnerability in the crisis.

The years 1931 - 1939 saw a steady increase in the urban population. The number of unemployed peaked in 1933, with 20% of the Canadian workforce out of work, declined until 1937 and then began to rise again. Despite these fluctuations, the basic composition of the workforce (age, sex), remained stable. Between 1929 - 1933 the gross national export fell 42% in dollar terms. Despite this, wages in organized sectors (metals and construction) initially remained stable. By 1932 massive wage cuts had begun. This process was accompanied by a rise in prices spurred on by American inflationary trends and severe crop failures due to drought.

The period between 1933 and 1939 was one of limping recovery. Despite technical innovation (resulting of course in job loss) there was only a slow

revival in capital goods production. The government manipulation of tariffs led to an increase in volume trade, if not prices. The expenditure on consumer goods and services remained well below the 1920's. It is in these sectors that women were employed.

Social policy during the Depression was as bleak as the economic outlook. Unemployment relief lay within the jurisdiction of municipalities, with limited subsidies from the provincial and federal governments. As municipalities went bankrupt, relief funds dried up leaving families to starve. The federal government dropped its programme of relief works for the humiliation of direct relief. Recipients were forced to prove that they were destitute. By 1934 the federal programme consisted of public works. In 1935, influenced by the American New Deal, Bennett proposed a reform programme of unemployment insurance, Minimum Wage Laws, limits to hours of work, unfair trade regulations; all based on International Labour Organization policy from the 1920's.<sup>7</sup> These reforms were declared constitutionally 'ultra vires' (in conflict with provincial rights). Bennett was defeated at the polls, but federal policy continued along on its laissez-faire way.

In December 1932, 298,950 Canadians received relief; by 1933 this figure has risen to a peak of 1,370,562. By 1937 there were 1,289,420 recipients. The basic figures remained stable.<sup>8</sup>

The situation in British Columbia reflected these fluctuations in the Canadian economy. As a primary export economy, the effects of international demand and price fluctuation were severe. This took its toll on the social front: in 1932 the Labour Gazette describes "an unprecedented amount of unemployment".<sup>9</sup> Employers did not hesitate to use this situation to

their own advantage:

Employers, to a larger extent than formerly, have been able to secure labour upon their own terms; it has been difficult to understand the attitude of some employers whose men are obliged to live in camps, in keeping up the charge for board at a figure entirely out of harmony with the wages paid.<sup>10</sup>

By 1934, only three out of twenty-five firms had decreased their pay-rolls and the downturn in wages during 1933 was arrested. By 1937, the B.C. economy had moved into a clear upwards trend, but this was coupled with an increased migration to the province; thus, the labour market remained under pressure. The economy was still uneven in 1938, and the lumber industry, central to B.C. was in decline.<sup>11</sup>

Developments in the Canadian and British Columbia labour movements must be placed within this economic and social context. In 1930, only 15% of the paid labour force in Canada was organized. This figure rose to 16% in 1935, and 18% by 1940.<sup>12</sup> The majority of trade unionists in Canada belonged to the international unions (craft unions) in 1930 (71%). By 1935, with the advent of the Workers Unity League, this figure had declined to 52% international membership, rising to 63% in 1940, with the development of the CIO unions in Canada. According to the Labour Gazette, 1930 was a difficult year for the unions: the majority of strikes were lost. By 1932, the figures were more positive.

In 1929 28,000 workers in B.C. were unionists, divided between the Trades and Labour Congress and the All Canadian Congress of Labour, a small national body. This membership figure had declined to 21,207 workers by 1932. Unemployment had a detrimental effect on the unions in B.C. The Vancouver and New Westminster District Trades and Labour Congress lost 40% of its members in the first two years of the Depression. The craft unions turned their backs on the unemployed. Between 1931 - 1935, however, real wages rose by 18%,<sup>13</sup>

due to the combativity of trade unionists.

The organizing attempts of the 1930's were led, in part by the Workers Unity League, a member of the Red International of Labour Unions. WUL was established by the Communist Party Of Canada in 1929. Its rank and file members were not necessarily members of the Communist Party, although its leadership was comprised of party cadre. Its focus was the organization of unorganized workers, although it also functioned as a dual union, breaking away militants from the reformist union leadership. Its constitution included provisions for members at large; national rank and file movements; and national and local industrial unions to affiliate. It supported the principle of industrial organization, and was instrumental in introducing this concept to British Columbia. It stood on the principle of "democratic election and right of recall" of the leadership; majority representation for workers in a specific industry on leadership bodies; special organizations for women and youth; a sliding scale of fees; adequate strike fund and average industry wages for staffers. <sup>14</sup>

The WUL established unions in rail, communications, food and agriculture, furniture manufacture and domestic service. These were primarily paper locals. It had its biggest organizational successes in the forest industry, amongst miners and longshoremen. These areas received its attention because of their strategic weight in the economy. These unions led strikes for union hiring procedures and recognition, and the decasualizing of labour. It also established the Fish and Cannery Workers Industrial Union in 1933, encompassing women workers. The WUL had 40,000 members by 1935, compared to the Trade and Labour Congress' 103,424 in 1934. Of 189 strikes across the country, in 1934, 109 were led by the WUL. <sup>15</sup> In British Columbia the WUL was most successful in organizing and leading the unemployed. WUL received criticisms from some

unions, such as the Amalgamated Society of Printing, who considered it as

quarters of the labour movement for its willingness to lead ill-timed and ill-prepared strikes (the One Big Union press called the WUL leadership the "comicals").<sup>16</sup>

By 1935, the Communist Party had adopted a Popular Front position. Motivated by the emergence of the Committee for Industrial Organization in the United States, the CPC led WUL unions back into the TLC(AFL). This resulted in a 30% rise in the Vancouver and District Labour Council membership by 1935. The labour movement in the province began to organize around health insurance and the right to organize. This latter was legalized in 1937, with the Industrial Conciliation Act. By 1939, with the expulsion of the CIO unions from the TLC, the ACCL grew as unions such as the International Woodworkers of America, the United Mineworkers, and the International Ladies Garment Workers Union merged into it. The B.C. labour movement was divided along a left/right political axis, as well as industrial/craft lines. It was a situation which saw "business being overshadowed by political debate": a climate not necessarily conducive to organizing.

The left in the trade unions was represented by two political poles: the Communist Party of Canada and the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation. The CPC's initial influence in the 1930's was marginal: mostly concentrated in the Finnish, Ukrainian and Jewish immigrant communities. Nevertheless, it became instrumental in unemployed struggles, and was forced underground in 1932, when its leadership was arrested. It carried on its work through its mass fronts. Through its leadership in the unemployed struggles it grew to 8200 members in 1935 (60% of whom were unemployed). By 1939 there were 16,000 adherents, (although it lost 10-15% of its members with the Hitler-Stalin pact).<sup>17</sup>

The CCF was formed in 1932 at the Calgary Conference, bringing together socialists, co-operative members, trade unionists, farmers and progressives. In B.C, it united the League for Social Reconstruction, the Cooperative Council of British Columbia, the People's Party, the Socialist Party of B.C., the Four Point Plan, and Army of the Common Good. By 1934 it had 106 clubs in B.C. and won 33½% of the vote (7 MLAs). The international unions endorsed the CCF. Its programme differed from the CPC's in its adherence to a peaceful transition to socialism through economic cooperation and its rejection of the Soviet Union. <sup>18</sup> *of adherents in this period also had to accept the idea of a new system of the workers' control of production by the workers.*

Both of these organizations recognized elements of the oppression of women. The CPC's women's organizations were directly involved in organizing women workers, the CCF initially concentrated on party activity outside of the workplace. The experience of working women can best be understood within the broad framework of these organized manifestations of working class consciousness. Before examining the impact of this radicalization on women's unionization, it is necessary to examine the position of working women within the labour force of Canada and British Columbia, and identify the specific forms of exploitation and oppression which could prompt organization.

From 1931 - 1939 there was a slight growth of the female labour force; 32,000 more women entered production. However, 31,000 women were also displaced in this period. In 1931 there were 2,899,000 men working; by 1933 a low of 2,690,000 men held jobs; by 1935, 2,950,000 men worked and by 1939 the figure had risen to 3,212,000. Women were represented in the following figures: in 1931, 731,000 women worked; in 1933: 720,000 (the low for women was reached in 1932); in 1935: 786,000 worked and in 1939: 863,000. The figures for women with paid jobs was uneven from 1931 - 1933 (510,000 rising to 582,000). Except for the disparities between 1932 - 1933, employment patterns for men and women are similar. Unemployment figures also correlate. <sup>19</sup>

Female workers were concentrated within the following sectors according to the 1931 census: forestry: 19,147; manufacturing: 181,290; retail trade: 96,979; finance: 24,966; service (community, business and government): 148,000; personal: 211,420. Women made up 31.5% of all clerical workers; 78% of all teachers; the majority of restaurant employees; 8.5% of manual workers; 2.1% of agricultural workers; and 69.2% of personal service workers.

In British Columbia, women formed 9.75% of the B.C. labour force in 1931 and 10.04% of it in 1932. In 1934, 19,392 women were employed compared to 14,841 in 1933. There were 21,924 women working in the province in 1936, and 26,732 by 1938.

These figures denote two things: women were a significant part of the provincial and national labour forces. Women were also concentrated in traditional female job ghettos.

Social attitudes towards these working women verged on hostility. Articles in magazines such as Macleans, or in newspapers like the Province provide evidence of a running debate on the right of women to jobs. In the Macleans of July 15, 1931, in an article entitled 'This Freedom' by A Business Woman' it is stated that "every girl employed means a husband or a potential husband unemployed". The article continues:

Today the country is in a bad state due to women usurping the jobs formerly held by men, with the result that the native-born birthrate is steadily falling.

The article ends by calling for a quota on the number of women who should be permitted to work.

Other articles in Macleans, such as "A Reply to This Freedom" by A spinster (September 15, 1931) rebut her arguments. This woman argues against the exploitation of women by women. She suggests that women have a right to jobs

*method. 1931-1938  
used a newspaper  
source of labor  
ideal. 1931  
women  
displaced*

in industry , protection by Minimum Wage Laws and improved conditions. She discusses the financial pressures on single and married women who support their families, and ends with a call for crèches. A later article called 'This Anti-Feminism' calls for a defense of feminism as it "defends women's rights, and wins legal and financial gains for women."<sup>22</sup>

Articles in the Province describe the lack of concern and opportunities for unemployed women, especially those without families to fall back on. This is at a time when great concern was manifested for single men.

The Labour Gazette summarizes the dominant attitude towards women's work in the Depression:

The popular belief as to the sudden invasion of the labour market by women in recent years is not in accordance with the facts.<sup>23</sup>

Trade union attitudes towards working women could but reflect social attitudes on some levels. This is mediated in part by the relatively critical stance towards the position of women under capitalism ,held by some unions. The ILO described the need for protective legislation for women based on their "physical nature".<sup>25</sup> It stated that social tradition made women responsible for the management of the house, housekeeping and childbearing. For these reasons women could become easily overworked and ruin their health. Rather than relieve women of these extra tasks, the ILO proposes to change the conditions of women's work, outside the home.

It was also stated that this position in the home affected women's interest in unions:

In the second place, her attention is to some extent distracted from the collective interests of the workers, and in particular, she shrinks from the effort involved in taking an active part in the trade union movement.<sup>24</sup>

Women's economic activity was unstable, and therefore their economic value was reduced, affecting wage possibilities. The principle of equal pay

was supported as an ideal, it was however recognized as "unrealizable".

The Trades and Labour Congress (AFL) included in its constitution support for equal pay for equal work. The debate raging within the Congress suggests that the fundamental right of women to work was challenged. At the 1934 Convention, Resolution #48 suggests that positions held by women in government departments should be held by young men, as men were being denied office jobs by working women. This posed a danger to the morale of the society. The resolution calls for a campaign to pressure the government to replace these "girls" with men. Another resolution at the convention called for safety measures in plants where women were exposed to dangerous poisons. This year saw a debate emerge on the Minimum Wage Laws. Mrs. Jean Laing, a delegate from Toronto stated: "We should establish these things ourselves", rather than relying on the government.<sup>25</sup> She then suggest that it was peculiar that employers, who formerly opposed Minimum Wage legislation were now advocating fixing Minimum Wages in view of the many methods used in the past to evade laws." Other delegates posed the need for uniform regulations ; the legal right to unionize; and organizing campaigns in key sectors.

In 1935 the debate on Minimum Wage Laws continued. Resolution 14 called for a minimum of \$14/ week (union rates) and a 40 hour week, coupled with a mass trade union organizing drive. Some unionists opposed the laws, fearing that they would be used as a ceiling for the wages of male skilled workers. Delegate Mary McNabb stated strongly that the TLC must support Minimum Wages, but that trade union organization could provide the only guarantee of decent rates.<sup>26</sup>

The 1936 Convention pressed for domestics, hall porters, agricultural and home workers to have collective bargaining rights. Discussion at the

1937 and 1938 Conventions centered on the loopholes in the Minimum Wage laws. Workers were hired at learners' rates and then discharged as soon as their apprenticeship was over. Retail workers at this convention who were in the process of organizing, asked for special dues. This request was refused. Calls for organizing campaigns were met by the TLC leadership telling affiliate unions that the Congress was a legislative, not an organizing body and that initiatives and resources for organizing must come from affiliates.

The 1938 convention reiterated earlier trends on women's Minimum Wage legislation: A study of the cost of living was urged, in order to negotiate a realistic minimum. The Convention supported Mother's Allowance in order to 'keep the family together'.

Dorothy Livesay in Right Hand, Left Hand describes attitudes towards women within the working class movement. She suggests that few working class women had access to birth control, or to an alternate perspective on their lives as women: the emancipation that intellectual women of the 1930's strived for. Rather, these women remained trapped in the home. When challenged, their political men would state that they, "married her to raise my children". Livesay admits, "In theory, we were free and equal as comrades on the left, in practice, our right hand was tied to the kitchen sink".<sup>27</sup> Despite these restrictions, wives of union militants were drawn into major struggles; Livesay documents the central role of women in winning the Corbin miners' strike in 1935.

Attitudes towards working women were better within the Communist wing of the labour movement, although there was an idealization of women's role within the family. The Workers Unity League supported equal pay for equal work; the seven hour day, with six hours for dangerous occupations; the 5 day week; maternity leave, special compensation for women; 100% unionization; the abolition of sweatshops decent wages and class unity. These

see p. 14

concentrate on the superexploitation of women workers. WUL saw the inclusion of women within the wage labour force as part of the expansion of the productive forces which drew in the entire family. The WUL criticized reformist unions for excluding women or sidestepping women's issues.

The Women's Labour Leagues were affiliates of the WUL. These were launched by the CPC in an attempt to unite working women, unorganized workers and housewives. The WLL programme included free birth control clinics, the organization of the unorganized; maternity insurance; relief grant increases; adequate food; housing; medical and dental care for children; and end to military training. Both the WUL and the WLL saw the necessity to organize women because they could be in the frontlines of preventing another war. Women, drawn into wartime production would be able to sabotage imperialist intervention. The WLL indicted the labour movement for its previous failures:

One of the reasons why the organized labour movement has not made more progress in the past than it has done is that it has not sought the cooperation of women. 28

It would be left-leaning men and women who would play a significant role in organizing unorganized women workers. *Women's League*

The organization of women workers in the province must be situated within the general conditions which women faced in the province's labour market. The Department of Labour Minimum Wage Reports and other documentation in the Labour Gazette provide detailed information on the women in B.C.

In 1929, before the Depression, 61.87% of women workers were paid above the minimum in their areas; 18.02% at the minimum and 20.11% below. The majority of infringements of the regulations were in restaurants. In 1930 fruit pickers, domestics and farm women were exempted from the laws. The percentages of wage levels for women covered by the Legislation is similar to 1922. 29

The Factory Act in B.C. in 1931 allowed for an extension of hours of work. Demand for fruit pickers and scanners declined, as there was surplus labour in the agricultural districts; this reduced employment opportunities for young urban women. The Wage Board saw its role as insuring that the worst infractions were prosecuted (if reported). This would:

Prevent wage scales falling to subnormal levels out of fair proportion to living costs, thereby creating a condition prejudicial to the well-being of women and girls.<sup>30</sup>

Nevertheless, the average wage fell from \$17.37/week to \$16.71. Of 18,154 women covered in the province, 4,175 were receiving below the Minimum. Staff cuts were also occurring: 433 firms dropped staff. This trend went hand in glove with wage cuts: 464 firms cut wages, resulting in an average reduction of 2.45%. Minimum wages in the fruit and vegetable sector fell from 30¢/hour to 25¢/hour.<sup>31</sup> Figures for working women in the province in 1931 indicate that 76.65% were single, 19.49% married, and 3.8% widowed. These basic percentages remained stable through the Depression.

The next year demonstrated an increase in jobs for domestics, perhaps because of the low wage levels, a result of declining employment possibilities in agriculture and other areas. Wage levels continued to fall, in part because the work week was shortened. The average wage fell to \$15.08.

By 1933 only 40% of female employees earned above the Minimum Wage. The best wages were present in telecommunications, clerical jobs and canneries. The latter was deceptive, as the work was seasonal. A gradual upswing in employment figures began.

In 1934 the Female Minimum Wage Act replaced previous legislation. The Board was empowered to collect wages for women, to insure their payment. Standards were set for catering jobs and office work. Again, exemptions

were made, in this case for cooks in bunkhouses, and janitresses, with extended hours permitted in laundries and drug stores. Significantly, it was in laundries that the largest number of women received below the Minimum (674, 38%). Also significant was a statement by the Board that it would not usurp the recognized role of unions to negotiate the wage levels of their members.

Regulations for 1935 permitted additional loopholes in the Law. The compulsory shortened sixth day of work could now be any day, not Saturday. This could be problematic for women needing to attend to their families. By the next year wage levels in agriculture demonstrated an all-time low for women: \$160/year compared to \$291/year in 1929. As well, an increase was noted in <sup>the</sup> cottage industry, with some workers receiving as little as 27¢/day. Only 48.16% of women workers received above the Minimum Wage.

By 1937 there were 2,160 more women on the payrolls of the province's firms. The average wage for women rose from the 1936 level of \$12.96/week to \$13.30. Orders for Minimum Wages by this time covered theatres, manufacturing, the mercantile business, drug stores, personal service, janitresses and public housekeeping jobs. In 1938 rulings incorporated hotels, elevator operators hours of work, and confined split shifts to a 14 hour range. Reductions in hours without wage increases, however, could be more detrimental than positive, reducing income to below survival levels. In the next year, bills to incorporate farm workers, fruit pickers and domestics into the Act and to regulate an 8-hour day and 44 hour week were rejected by the Legislature.

An examination of wage trends in laundries, clerical, telecommunication and manufacturing jobs for women shows a general decline from 1930 - 1934. After this wages either held steady or increased until 1937 - 1938. Unionization was a factor in some of these increases. <sup>32</sup>

The data provides testimony to the existence of women within the labor force. It indicates that women faced job ghettoization, long hours of work, low wages and turnover in their workplaces. The effectiveness of the Minimum Wage Boards, the central mechanism for regulation of women's wages was limited. The standards they set were not enforced, except in instances where courageous women brought cases before the board. Even so, the employer was merely fined.

Directing the struggle for better conditions through the Boards required an understanding of a complex and confusing body of knowledge. The Board itself stated that many complaints were seen as unjustified, or misdirected out of ignorance. Although a successful complaint could result in a victory for one individual (and complaints were processed on the average of 40 per year), it would hardly deal with the issues facing the majority of working women. Only collective solutions could do this. As male unionists engaged in militant struggle, women workers, particularly in the Vancouver area, also began to unionize and strike.

The Labour Gazette provides some information on the location of women in the Nation's and province's unions, although not all years are documented. Many unions did not have separate lists of female workers.

In 1932, out of 48,179 paid working women in Canada, 3,939 were union members. Of these, 733 were B.C. residents. In 1933 there were 5,047 women in Canadian unions; 801 of them lived in B.C. These women were located in unions such as the Bookbinders Local 103, Communications Workers (WUL), and the Hotel and Restaurant and Beverage Dispensers Union, Textile Workers of America #1700. 33

By 1938, there were 21,488 organized women workers in Canada. Of these women, 10,857 were resident in Quebec and only 1,371 in B.C. By 1939, the province's figure had fallen to 1,121 out of a 22,790 organized women. 47

Women were members of these unions in the Lower Mainland: Clothing Workers of America #178; Domestic Workers Union #91 - TLC; International Ladies Garment Workers Union #82 and #190; the Hotel and Restaurant Employees Union; Hotel and Restaurant Employees Association and Beverage Dispensers #28; Retail Clerks International Protective Association #279; Stenographers, Typists, Bookkeepers Assistants #18172; United Garment Workers of America and may have been members of other unions such as the Meat Cutters and Packing House Employees Federal Union #95 or the Native Brotherhood. <sup>34</sup>

The majority of evidence can be found for women's organizations in the Lower Mainland area, although struggles are documented on the island and other areas for specific industries. An examination of the minutes of the area's labour council presents evidence of women's unionists' activity, although few women were delegates to the VDTLC. Women also attended as representatives of various pro-labour support groups, such as the Housewives' League. Women do appear as delegates for some unions, through the decade. These include the Bookbinders, Domestic Workers (Mary Johnston, Eva Cant and Mildred Dougan); the Tailors (Mrs. Patterson, Sister C. Hoare); Hotel and Restaurant Employees; Textile Workers (Catherine Wilson); Office Employees (Doris Neelands); Retail Clerks (Sister Fletcher); ILGWU (Miss Emil Walker, J. Leckie, and Sister A. Colebrooke); United Garment Workers (Mrs. I Kossack Mrs. Smith) and Film Exchange Employees (Margaret Edgett, Phyllis Harr).<sup>35</sup>

The specific process by which these unions became organized can be reconstructed through the press of left organizations: The Clarion, B.C. Worker, Pacific Advocate; minutes of VDTLC meetings, the Labour Gazette; minutes of local union meetings and other archival material. The history of organization in each sector provides evidence of the demands and pressures which organizing women faced. Strikes occurred, generally of minimum time in

duration.

The fishing industry had a significant history of militancy throughout the 1930's. Initially, it was organized by the WUL. By 1931 there were two unions in the industry: the Fishermen's Industrial Union and the United Fishermen's Federal Union(TLC). In 1932 salmon fishermen struck against wage cuts and price cuts on fresh fish. By 1933, the Fish and Cannery Workers Industrial Union had been established, built on the earlier FIU. By 1934, it had four locals and concentrated on organizing across racial lines. <sup>36</sup>

In 1934 a strike occurred at Sunbury, B.C. in the salmon cannery. <sup>37</sup> Workers demanded the abolition of piece rates and opposed the discharge of a worker for union activity. The strike involved 40 workers, lasted 4 days and resulted in a victory for the workers. Workers in the canneries at this time were subject to long hours of work, uneven shifts, extreme geographic isolation, away from medical facilities; no childcare; subhuman living conditions in company shacks and equally substandard working conditions. Reports describe leaking roofs in canneries where workers stood in pails of hot water in order to keep warm.

In 1935, an agreement was signed at the Deep Bay Cannery which granted women  $22\frac{1}{2}\text{¢}$ /hour and men  $27\text{¢}$ /hour, with a  $2\frac{1}{2}\text{¢}$ /hour raise guaranteed for the next year. Time and  $\frac{1}{2}$  was granted for holidays and Sundays. A cannery committee was established to implement the agreement. Such committees became common place in the industry, and allowed workers a say in matters such as food and improvement to living quarters. In 1936, a specific organization for Native workers was established: the Pacific Coast Native Fishermen's Association of Alert Bay.

In 1937 women working in the Namu cannery struck to defend the struggles of Native and Japanese fishermen. White workers crossed the picket lines.

*needs footnote*

Despite this, an increase of \$1/ticket was established. In the same year women organized in Alaska canneries (Ketchikan) and won equal pay with male workers. The Fisherman of November 8, 1938 states: "Women were used in many industries by employers as cheap labour to compete with men who had families to support." The organization of women would prevent this in the future. In the same year, cannery agreements covered additional women in B.C.

The Women's Auxiliaries of unions in the industry were active. Wives travelled with their husbands to the fishing grounds, and often worked in the canneries, cleaning fish. The women's auxiliaries were used as a method of drawing women into support of the union activities of their fishermen husbands, as a "bulwark" of union activity. Only one example of a woman fisherman can be found in the union's press in this period. The October 10, 1939 paper contains an article on Betty Lowman, who fished for halibut and belonged to the Deep Sea Fishermen's Union:

Betty Ann who is 24, robust and freckled and who likes to sing opera when she fishes, began her career of working at unusually odd jobs about 4 years ago. It was then that she paddled her 14-foot dug-out canoe from Anacortes to Ketchikan.

Other women went out on the boats with their husbands to assist with the catch. This drew them into union struggles. In February, 1939, this quote appears in the Fisherman:

I am glad that we live in these times of struggle if only because it gives us the opportunity to prove to our husbands and fathers how willing we are to really stand with them in their fight.

In June of 1939 women supported a struggle to raise fish prices (the fishermen sold to the canneries). Women asked for representation at mass meetings to facilitate their participation. *- at end read except oral history tape -*

Women workers organized in other sectors of the food industry as well.

In 1934, the "only agricultural struggle in years" was begun by hops-pickers in Sardis and Chilliwack over living conditions and wages.<sup>30</sup> It involved fewer than one hundred workers. The next year, the hops fields exploded based on the last years victory which raised rates from 20¢ to 30¢/hour (3¢ above the Minimum Wage in the sector), 1500 workers went on strike in Chilliwack. Men and women, many of them Native were employed in the fields. The strike action resulted in arrests: four men were arrested for "inciting to riot" and having "intoxicants in a native dwelling". The workers raised the demand that the Minister of Labour intervene to improve conditions. The strike was lost. This is an example of a struggle involving both men and women.

An article in the Pacific Advocate of September 2, 1938 describes the terrible conditions in agriculture: whole families (again mostly Native) worked for 13 hours/day and 55¢/day per adult in the Agassiz area. The article calls for organization.

Workers organized not only in the fields but in the fruit processing canneries. The WUL initiated such organization in 1930 through the Foodworkers Industrial Union, with minimal success. By 1936, the wages of women in canneries had been pushed down from 30¢/hour to 25¢/hour. The minutes of the VDTLC show that the Jam, Fruit and Vegetable Cannery Workers Union #105 was affiliated to the TLC in October 1936. In 1937, attempts were made to organize the Broder Cannery in New Westminster; in August of that year the union called for a national organizing drive. As well, VDTLC officials were asked to attend a contract session. Organization of vegetable canneries continued throughout 1938. In the same year a brief was presented to the Minimum Wage Board in response to conditions such as

Ashcroft, where women were forced to buy overpriced uniforms, and workers were known to faint from heat and overwork. Despite this, Patullo Pearson ordered a reduction of wages for tomato cannery workers, and exemptions from Minimum Wage restrictions, after a strike by operators.

Perhaps the most militant organizing in this period amongst women occurred in another food related area: restaurants and hotels. Waitresses and busgirls in many small cafes came into contact with pro-union workers such as longshoremen, woodworkers and miners; as well as unemployed men involved in the area's struggles. Waitressing was a common occupation for young women, and many women became involved in organizing, despite the high turnover of the labour force. Wages were often below Minimum, and workers were denied rest periods and decent meals. As well, waitresses were concerned with the quality of the food they served: resolutions at TLC Congresses suggest that working conditions were below health standards.

A strike of waitresses from February 23 - March 16, 1931, involved workers in two restaurants. Their central demand was opposition to proposed 20% wage reductions (from \$15 to \$12/hour). In the next year the largest sectors of union growth in the country were barbers and restaurant and hotel workers. By 1933 there were three chartered local of the HREBDU in Canada, including one in Vancouver. One restaurant strike in Vancouver lasted from August to October 1933, involved seven workers whose demands included a one year contract, 8 hour day and 6 day week, as well as a wage increase. They won.

In 1935 the Hotel and Restaurant Employees International Union #28, led by CPC members, won a closed shop and hiring through the union, two elements of the WUL programme. They established one of the best contracts

in the business, including three different categories of restaurants and hotels. Male waiters however received better pay than waitresses in the less expensive restaurants, although where men and women worked the same job the union won equal pay.

The next year, a strike from August 29 - September 5 of women workers won an increase in pay and a reduction of hours. The Deutchland Cafe was struck on February 18, 1936. On April 27, a mass support meeting was built by the HREU. VDTLC records show that by July 7 both the Only and the Public Cafes had signed agreements. The former signed after a strike prompted by the firing of staff who demanded back pay. Workers won the 8-hour day, an end to harrassment for union activity and back pay. In September the Trocodero was struck and picket lines went up. Descriptions of these strikes suggest strong support from the community, including help on the picket lines themselves. By December 1, agreements had been signed with the King's Cafe and the Pall Mall.

These small strikes continued through 1937. In May the White Lunch Cafe was struck. By mid-month it was listed as "unfair". This tactic of an "unfair" declaration was used heavily in this period to call for a boycott of an establishment by pro-labour people. White Lunch workers demanded \$14/week (from \$9.50). Despite an immediate victory, the union was lost 6 months later due to turnover. The lack of legislation permitting union representation meant that employer intimidation was facilitated. As well, the only recourse for protest was job action. In several restaurants, including the White Lunch employers attempted to form company unions, often associated with the ACC (All Canadian Congress of Labour). In June of 1937 there was dual organization at Scott's Cafe by both the HREU and the United Hotel and

Restaurant Employees Association (ACCA). This resulted in a long struggle at Scott's; one which the HREU eventually won. The Pacific Advocate and the minutes of the VDTLC refer to an apparently unusual "roaring speech" given by a Miss Emma Whitman, a Scott's striker. The Advocate laments the lack of more strong union women, such as Miss Whitman.<sup>39</sup> Strikes in New Westminster and Vancouver resulted in union recognition and reinstatement of union organizers.

Despite these victories, it was all too easy to lose union recognition due to turnover and harrassment. In November 1937 the HREU had lost the Stella Cafe, Waldorf, Peter Pan and Eden restaurants. The B.C. Worker describes another struggle: ~~only~~ white waitresses to sustain their jobs in Chinese owned cafes which employed them at union rates. This contravened an ordinance which prohibited the employment of white women by Orientals. Both women involved were married, with unemployed husbands and children to support. The Mother's Council and the waitresses organized mass meetings and won public support for their cause.

Organization continued through 1938. The HREU expanded its jurisdiction to include chambermaids and workers in apartment hotels. The VDTLC set up a campaign to reach these workers.

Another major sector which was almost exclusively female was domestic service. Working class women had little choice but to enter domestic service, as few other job opportunities existed. This trend was accentuated by the Relief system, which directed women into such work rather than providing direct relief. An article in the Province written in 1936 suggests that domestic service created extreme hardships for women with children to look after, because it generally meant rooming away from home.<sup>40</sup>

Conditions in 1935 were abysmal; a result of the large surplus labour force. Women worked 60 -80 hours a week, board and wages amounted to \$30 / per month, for experienced help and \$20 for inexperienced. Some women in 1936 - 1937 earned as little as \$5/month for a 10 hour day. By 1935 the Domestic Service Union was formed and in December of 1936, a new union the Domestic Workers Union #91 applied for a VDTLC charter.

The Communists played a large role in this organizing, perhaps because of their weight in the unemployed movement and the close relationship between domestic service and unemployment for women. The leaders of the DWU report on threats made by the Ku Klux Klan, early in the drive, perhaps related to the CPC prominence. Tim Buck, secretary general of the CPC was quoted by an organizer as saying:

Because domestic service is the basic employment for girls, the raising of this standard of the occupation would automatically raise the standard of all other working girls. 41

The union called for Minimum Wages, a union hiring bureau to regulate standards in the sector, protective legislation and training programmes. It also supported health insurance and accident compensation, contemporary demands of the labour movement. The drive was supported by sundry women's organizations, including the Mother's Council, <sup>and</sup> the Women's Labour League.

By 1937, the union had signed up 400 out of 1500 workers in the Vancouver area. Many women apparently contacted the local; many also expressed a hesitancy in joining. In March of 1937 the union asked the VDTLC to ask the TLC for lower dues for domestics. The same month saw the union win jurisdiction over office cleaners and domestics from the Building Trades Council.

On April 6, 1937 the union made a statement condemning the Relief Office for sending women out to work as domestics at "scandalously low wages and long hours of employment". 42 This statement was taken up by Alderwoman Helena Gutteridge;

Alderman Pettplace who accompanied union representatives to the Relief Committee of the City Council to discuss the domestics' demands.

The union launched a fund appeal to the unions to build its campaign. Some unions such as the Street Railway Workers donated money (\$10 in their case). An article in the July Sun reviewed the workers' demands.<sup>43</sup> They first reviewed current conditions: an average wage of \$12 - \$15/month for a 12-15 hour day for experienced workers; \$5 - \$10/ month for the inexperienced; 50¢/day for non-live-in workers and for others, board alone. The union proposed two scales: one for a 54 hour week, the other for a 60 hour week. For the former, a cook would receive \$25 + \$35/month, a mother's helper: \$15/month. The second proposed several dollars more per month. The union also demanded a maximum deduction of \$2.50/week for a single room, set vacation schedules of 1 - 2 weeks, hourly rates for day workers, and car-fare.

The campaign continued with a high public profile. At a public meeting on November 13, 1937 Mildred Duggan, an officer of the union said: "Employers are looking for bargains in maids just like shoppers".<sup>44</sup> She complained that foreign women were being hired to work at wages lower than those acceptable to Canadian women.

In 1938 Dorothy Steeves continued to press for direct relief for women despite the proliferation of domestic jobs. This would allow a slackening of the labour market and force up domestics' wages. The CCF developed a Bill on domestic workers' rights. That year the union won a \$10/month raise a room charge of \$2 - \$3; meals reduced to \$4; a 48 hour week; time and  $\frac{1}{2}$  for overtime, but could not win inclusion in the Minimum Wage Laws. Meanwhile women's groups campaigned door to door for support.

The organization of garment and textile workers in B.C. was not dominated by the left of the trade union movement, but was a result of international expansion. By 1933 the Textile Workers of America had been established with Miss Catherine Wilson as the city's only woman business agent. By April 1935 the United Garment Workers had established a local at the Kokomo plant and had launched a campaign for the use of union labels on garments. The Tailors Union existed by 1935 and by 1937 the International Ladies Garment Union had launched a campaign for affiliation. In July 1938 it won a reduction to a forty hour week for its members from forty-four hours, with no loss in pay. It focused on the union label campaign as a tactic to insure that retail outlets bought union-made goods. The ILGWU generally tried to avoid conflict. This was a factor in insuring that workers in the garment industry never won hourly rates but remained piece-workers. Successes in contract negotiations in the late 1930's were in part a result of the increased demand for garments and textiles for use as war material.

As the producers of consumer goods began to organize they were joined by those who sell it, it was to sell such products. In 1935 the B.C. Workers' News called for the chain stores to organize. In 1937 the Retail Clerks Protective Association had launched a campaign; by 1938 this had reached workers at Piggly-wiggly and Safeway. Sales women in Five and Dime stores on the island organized as well as workers in chain drug stores. They demanded paid overtime, a 48 hour week, \$14.50 as starting rate. An article in the Fisgerman lamented the lack of such organizing in Vancouver. It indicted Norman Woolworth for getting rich off of "wealth created by young girls working for starvation wages and cheap crockery made by kids".<sup>45</sup> Meanwhile, a lockout in Vancouver resulted in union recognition.

Organization reached a crisis point when the federal government ruled that grocery clerks could not be defined as a separate unit in a store. Despite this., organizing occurred at Woodworth's (meat cutters) and at the Hudson's Bay Company.

Clerical and telecommunications workers also organized in this period. In 1932 the WUL set up the Communications Workers Union. In 1935 the "hello girls" at the phone company were divided over unionization. The office-workers called for an end to the use of non-union labour by affiliate unions in the VDTLC. They also opposed a percapita dues increase in 1938. In 1939 the union stressed that it encompassed both male and female workers. It called for only 10% of office workers for a firm to be employed below the Minimum, rather than the legal 33 $\frac{1}{2}$ %.

Workers in laundries were also organizing. On July 6, 1937 the Laundry Workers Union, Local 233 applied for certification. The union went under a year later. One of the issues which concerned the union was the mechanization of the laundries and speed-ups.

There are other instances of women's struggles. Hospital workers at Vancouver General Hospital fought for pay increases and against lay-offs in 1935. The Restmore Factory girls gave over one hour's worth of their wages to the Relief Camp Workers Union.

Despite the weight of craft unionists within it, the VDTLC was able to play a significant role in organizing unorganized workers. Its Organizing Committee was dominated by delegates from the CPC, who insured that the resources were allocated to organize.

It is a little to the struggle

A striking feature of these struggles is the militancy of the workers. This description gives an example of such militancy:

You should have seen a young girl picket walking beside a scrap iron scab in "anaimo, telling him quietly so that the cops couldn't stop her, "You rotten scab, you dirty \_\_\_\_, you \_\_\_\_." I've never seen the rest in print so I couldn't spell it. 46

This militancy fits into the context of massive urban struggles of the 1930s, primarily those of the unemployed. / To p. 1

Women organized without leadership from the established unions. The TLC had put the burden of organization onto affiliate unions, but chartered locals often did not exist in areas where women were present. As well, the need for material resources was clear, and the TLC expressed an unwillingness to facilitate the affiliation of impoverished women through lowering the dues.

Organized labour exhibited disinterest or hostility to many of the issues facing women, instead taking a defensive stand to protect previously established conditions and organization. The early 1930's in B.C. saw a decline in general union membership, a situation which could hardly aid in motivating expansion. Some unionists perceived women as an actual threat to their jobs.

Women worked in the most depressed sectors of the economy, ones which traditionally were characterized by low wages, poor conditions and lack of organization. Campaigns tended to focus on primary industry, sectors strategic to the province's economy. In the East, the larger weight of women in manufacturing resulted in a competition between unions to organize them, in B.C. there were no such pressures.

Rather, when women were organized it was in support of men's struggles or through the efforts of the Communists, and primarily, women themselves.

Through their affiliation to the VDTLC, women unionists did receive limited, but material resources in their organizing campaigns.

The central issues which faced women were ones of basic survival: establishing Minimum Wages and conditions. The overwhelming majority of strikes involve these issues. Government agencies were ineffective vehicles for such demands.

As well, women were affected by the level of militancy and general left-wing motion of the period. They played central roles in supporting struggles in the unions and in organizing themselves, even in the face of social pressures to remain in the home. There was little conscious organization around women's demands outside of the superexploitation of female labour. This can be traced to the extreme oppression of women workers, as well as the general lack of recognition of the depths of women's oppression by the far left.

The unionization of women was most pronounced in the later Depression years, as the pressures on the labour market eased, and as the isolation of those unionists who expressed some concern over women workers was broken down through the merger of the WUL and the TLC unions. The lack of successful organization in female job ghettos is far from resolved. The struggles of these women in the 1930's hold a continued importance for unionists of today.

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