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Do British Columbia's Women Unionists Tell the Truth? Some thoughts on oral history and the interpretation of the past...

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I began the Women's Labour History Project because of a personal interest in Women's union history. As a trade unionist I had felt the marked lack of historical sources on working women's lives. The evident absence of even primary resource material made it logical to use oral history as a means of generating raw data.

My interest was to examine the ways that a critical consciousness developed in individuals and social groupings; to trace the interaction of material and ideational structures which underpin personal identity and activity. This corresponds to a view of history as a dynamic process, where conflict produces constant change. Such history takes place in many locations, my particular interest was the experience of "everyday life".

Consciousness matures as new understandings
~~Sensitivities and perceptions~~ *are* ~~are~~ *new* understandings are applied to questions and activity in women's lives. New realizations are often in conflict with past practices and beliefs. One woman I interviewed described her attempts to reconcile her past social contacts with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police with the violent role that they played in the Regina Riot:

This meeting was called as a citizens' meeting to protest the lack of jobs. We had interviewed the city about where to house the men coming off the rails and they had decided on the Exhibition Grounds. The men were asked specifically not to come to the meeting as it was a citizens' protest.

I was there at seven as I was selling literature and the thing that attracted my attention when I got there was that Swede's vans were on the streets and ~~hundreds~~. I was shocked to see Swede's vans there because this was seven and my dad worked for Swede's and he had a strict rule that the vans were to be in the warehouse by six come hail or high water. And here they were on the street.

The key person had just made an introduction and the speaker was going to start when there was a very shrill whistle. The police station was on the left hand corner of Market Street--the garage doors opened and about fifty or sixty police with billy sticks came whooping out. I was shocked, I couldn't believe my ears or eyes. Then the vans, which had been lining up on Osler Street opened up

and there was three men on horseback in each van. They were piano vans so they were low. The police came from one side, the RCMP from the other side and the whole crowd came streaming up Eleventh Avenue, which was the main drag. They just swept Market Square clean in a matter of minutes.

I even saw one police chasing a woman who had her baby in one of those high English baby carriages, and the thing was going like this and that woman was screaming. I could hear her above all of the hullabub. I'll never understand it as long as I live: WHY?

I ran back to the Unity Centre which was a hall where the unemployed gathered, and I got the shock of my life, to see at the end of the street, six RCMP on horseback. I ran around the back and went in, nobody else was around, just the RCMP. There was a RCMP breaking the plate glass window with a billy stick. I remember asking him what he was doing it for.

On Lorne Street was the town detachment of the RCMP. I went up there and it was just like climbing through a mountain. Lorne Street was just jammed with people. There was an RCMP standing on the street and he was presumably directing traffic. There was a little old lady standing just in back of him, he had asked her to please get back on the sidewalk. I'll never forget her as long as I'll live. She said, "Yes, officer, but that yellow stripe running down the side of your pants should be running up your back."

It was so astounding! My girlfriend's brother was an RCMP and we had been up to quite a few of the formal dances up at the detachment and they're beautiful affairs. The men are all dressed up in uniform and they are very distinctive and the music was great and we had a lovely time. And I've never heard a police addressed in this manner and no occasion at home to ever have anything to say or do about the police.

Barbara Stewart, the speaker in this example, went on to become a union organizer and a militant Communist.

There are other examples: Myrtle Bergren who was anti-union, worked for the courts and at one time refused to type a union contract because of her beliefs. Finally, because she was offered a great deal of money for her stenography skills, she typed the contract and became fascinated with the idea of union protection. Her biggest aspiration was to earn a high wage, have her own home and a car. A local union offered her a job at twice her salary; she reluctantly took it. Her entire life changed as organizers

explained the role of unions:

It was just the greatest thing that happened to me in my life. I saw the light; where I had been ashamed to take my boyfriends home to the home of my mother and father because they were so poverty stricken, I saw where they fitted into a class of people who were exploited.

And another woman, Josephine Hallock, one of the union movement's more outspoken defender of women's rights within the unions was not permitted to work outside the home by her husband. She carried on her articulate struggle from the vantage point of the union label committee, while yearning to return to the hospital union she had built.

What is interesting in all these stories is not only the point of conflict or contradiction, but also the complex reasons which provoked the changes or stalemates in these women's lives. Only through intensive interviewing can they be revealed.

Through the project I have undertaken some seventy interviews spanning the years 1910-1955, although concentrating on the Depression, Second World War and immediate aftermath. The interviews explore women's activities in union and union-related organizations.

They follow a standard interview format which includes childhood history, entrance to the workforce, the family's dependency on women's employment, weight of family responsibilities and changes in such, working conditions, work process, the reasons why unionism was attractive, initial and later union activity, her point of view on effective versus ineffective activity, attitudes towards working women which she experienced, attitudes towards union women, union-positive members in her household, outside support for union activism (social, cultural, political), effects of family duties on unionism, perceptions

of other women's consciousness, problems specific to women, if any, union's attitudes towards active women, retrospective thoughts on her experience.

The interviews were cross-referenced against primary research to test for chronological accuracy and differing memories and interpretations of events. Women then had the opportunity to respond to alternate perspectives on events and processes in their union. A series of interviews with men from the same time period allowed another level of interpretation and the possibility of viewing different priorities between the sexes.

The goal of the interviews, combining life history and event-focused questions, would hopefully permit an understanding of the impact of women's life cycles on their ability to be active union members, the relationship between younger women's aspirations and their later workforce practice and identity and the impact of a family's attitudes on its female members. I needed data which could indicate ways that changing needs was anticipated and the relative integration of women into the labour force impacted onto work identity and union activism.

The respondents included women from both service and industrial occupations and unions. Conditions, the legitimacy of workforce participation, long-term versus temporary workforce identity could be compared. My premise was that workplace and union consciousness would vary amongst workers in the primary (male-dominated) and secondary (female-dominated) labour markets. Responses were charted and compared.

Without reviewing my total findings, I would like to point out some interesting questions arising from this research. I believe that they pose a challenge to traditional notions of historical process and raise fresh perspectives on individual consciousness and activity.

I increasingly endorse a concept of historical "truth" which is interpretive, based on a person's location within social structures and on their perceptions of real processes surrounding herself or himself as well as their response to the ideas that explain the events and experiences in question. In this sense "facts" are human creations, through the instrumental shaping of events and through a cultural context in which history is understood. A "fact" is a form of shorthand for the manifest results of individuals and groups attempting to understand their lives.

For historical researchers, oral history provides a gateway to this subjective interpretation of immediate experience and other forms of historical documentation. It provides both context and emotional meaning.

I would like to provide several instances of historical "truths" that I have discovered in the course of my research. Here then, are the first set of historical "facts":

In the mid-1940s in B.C., the Hotel and Restaurant Employees Union in Vancouver established the first forty hour work week in a master contract in the province. The majority of the union's members voted for it. Employers in the restaurant sector were very hostile to this demand, feeling that they would be paying the same amount of money for less work (this belief was accurate). The International leadership of the HREU opposed the settlement in a variety of documented forms. They placed the local under trusteeship several years later. The number of organized restaurant workers in the city declined dramatically. Here now, are the two subjective "truths" as expressed by unionists interviewed by the project. Both sides were adamant that they were right.

The local leadership: They were a left-wing leadership, in majority female. They believed that the forty-hour day, combined with the elimination of split-shifts

shifts would free their members from an overly long work-week. Wage controls, established by the federal government during the war, ~~remained~~ in effect.' A pay raise was not feasible, so the union instead sought to improve conditions. They felt that the employers could afford the lesser hours and the necessary hiring of staff. Job creation was important as women would soon be leaving wartime shipyard, aircraft and wood industry jobs. They wanted to improve service sector conditions before pressure on the labour market lessened their negotiating power. The shorter work-week would act as a precedent for other locals and unions; it was a breakthrough and a model contract. Women would want to join the union and stay in the culinary industry, thus creating a stable workforce and organizing base. This would only occur if conditions were visibly improved. This leadership felt that the International leadership was not interested in restaurant organization because of the low dues base and extensive servicing needed to sustain organization. The local was placed under trusteeship to retaliate for the strength of its left-wing and their attempts to unseat the gangster-led American executive. Restaurants required rank and file participation to organize and service, this was a further threat to the corrupt International.

The International and its Supporters: They strongly believed that the forty hour work week was premature; employers would not be able to pay the costs entailed in hiring staff to cover the shifts. This clause might work with the larger restaurants but it would alienate smaller and poorer houses. The B.C. unionists should have waited until other unions had established the forty-hour week and then negotiated; smaller unions should not try to set precedents. This way, employers would have simply recognized the shorter week as a standard and not feel that they were being pressured by the union. The climate of labour relations in the industry had deteriorated since the demand was met. This would harm other workers in the union's jurisdiction, such

as the bartēnders. Restaurants would opt out of the union if they could not shorten the workweek. There were problems with a master agreement altogether in an industry with great discrepancies in the size of shops/ The women leaders would have done better to develop a sliding scale of hours for different houses. The contract favoured women restaurant employees but did little for higher paid male workers. Yet, the women were far more transient than the men, who provided a reliable dues base. This temporary nature of women's work in the industry would not change, even with improved conditions; most women would continue to work and then marry, leaving the industry. This was the "nature" of the industry. The local was placed under trusteeship because it disregarded the International's priorities and had an incompetent leadership. These women had worked as a fifth column inside the union, trying to usurp the position of an elected leadership. The restaurants were to blame for allowing their membership to drop; it was not the International's choice to let them go. As anticipated, their employers would simply not pay the rates in the master agreement. Besides, labour legislation made it difficult to organize only the front of the house and the immigrant cooks were notoriously difficult to unionize; the union simply did not have the financial and staff resources.

We can see from these two discussions that there is another level of truth to the historical facts. There are many points of agreement in the two interpretations as to what actually occurred. There is an important role for the historian in determining which factors did effect, for example, the fall in membership/ However, there is great value in the subjective testimony, in that it represents two historically vital points of view.

Here is another brief example of varying perspectives on a historical "truth".

In the International Woodworkers of America. industrial unionism and master agree-

ments established uniform conditions and wages that were an improvement over previous individual contracts. This is one truth. The other, is that for women workers in the industry, unions which organized on a district-wide scale and through master agreements may have won them better conditions but they excluded their specific demands. These were too difficult to negotiate, and required the support of male unionists, a support that was not forthcoming. For women, locally-based organization, which allowed more plant discussion and education, and individual plant contracts offered women in female-majority worksites to press for and win important contract language, such as equal pay for equal work. Once the union moved to a master contract women's issues were back-burnered for twenty years, despite their consistent organization. Here again, there are two distinct "truths" as to what is the most beneficial form of unionism for workers in an industry; each corresponds to the concrete reality of different groupings.

Oral history both individualizes historical process and creates a basis for generalization about social groupings otherwise undocumented. When applied to women's lives, large samples and quantification are especially useful. The personal is women's domain and is so often excluded from records. The kitchen conversation can be elevated from its previously valuable but unrecognized role of passing on essential information and cultural attitudes. For example, women who I have interviewed spoke of birth control methods, abortion and accessibility during the 1930's, as well as the relationship between wife battering and their inability to remain active in their union. One woman said to me, with some surprise: "But this is common knowledge!" Is it? There is an analogy with the value of rank and file accounts of union development elicited by oral historians and their ability to shed light on the traditional institutional view of a union's development.

An important point in dealing with these personal ideologies from the past must be made. It is critical that the researcher not impose her own bias onto past consciousness. Thus, the fact that women wanted to remain in industrial jobs at the end of the war, or that women fought for nursery schools does not make them feminists in the sense that we understand that word now. The retrospective quality of the oral history document can be a check against distortions of past consciousness. As one woman said in an interview: "I wish I had an overview of women's rights like as I have to-day; but back then I was living the day to day struggle and that was all that I could see."

It is clear in examining the data collected by the project that despite individual consciousness and activism, it is not individual acts that move the wheel of history, but rather the combined efforts of social layers. As well, it is a set of circumstances, shared by individuals that spurs them on in this process. What is exciting perhaps, is the ability to chart the sharing of perceptions and acts, while maintaining a perspective on individual personality and difference.

Women's sense of historical time and causality seems to differ from that of the men who I interviewed. Women were less able to recall a blow by blow set of events in a strike, yet very clear about the many layers of power within an organization, the details of work necessary to get a piece of work underway, and the vastly human problems that triggered their co-workers into action. This is, I believe both a result of women's long-term socialization and their particular location within structures. Women carried a great deal of the emotional and organizational work as shop stewards. Women were often attracted to unionism because of the advocacy role that they could play, for a role which, despite its traditional cover, they found empowering.

Women tended to be weak in an overall sense of union strategy. They were not encouraged

to serve on leadership bodies where decision were made. Men with left-wing political backgrounds had the strongest sense of historical development. Yet women who were also party members did not always share this view, like their less politicized sisters they recalled the day to day tasks of organizing a union and anecdotes about their co-workers attitudes and life situations. Their understanding of why women would become militant over working conditions and home pressures was profound. These factors give challenge to the notion of history as a progression of decipherable events and argue instead for an examination of the many layers within either one events or process and their interaction.

Again, a sense of linear historical time is displaced by the very cycles of women's movement in and out of the labour force. Domestic responsibilities played a large part in women's lives, whether they were mothers, daughters or wives. To be a union activist meant that your children had to be above a certain age or that you were childless. Women's careers as unionists tended to be interspersed with childrearing, as was their experience in the workplace. This placed distinct limits on their ability to rise to union leadership positions and interrupted a vision of ongoing development of their union.

Women with longer-term work commitments were more likely to support unionization. They endorsed long-term goals of workplace improvement, while women with more temporary job identities were either non-committal or impatient with certification processes and grievances, opting for short-term militancy outside of organizational structures. Conflicts emerged in unions on this basis.

Women's critical consciousness developed within the boundaries of one hand, of sexual oppression and class domination. Women expressed a growing sense of work identity, a refusal to return to the past, both to specific kinds of work, such as domestic service and previous economic dependency/ Women who returned

home after the war often reentered the workforce again from both economic necessity and a sense of restlessness. Women were angered at restrictions on their roles within unions, at being the power behind the president's throne when they would have more appropriately occupied it. Women often sought outside support, either political or social for their union activity, as a way of undermining the isolation that accompanied taking on traditionally male responsibility. Women walked a thin line between family hostility and respect within their unions engendered by their support for co-workers.

The strengths of oral history as a research method are embedded in its ability to open the world of subjectivity to the historian and in doing so, to shake the tenets of history understanding in a profound and transforming way.