

A BRIEF HISTORY OF
THE SERVICE, OFFICE and RETAIL WORKERS UNION OF CANADA:

A UNION FOR WORKING WOMEN

The Service, Office and Retail Workers Union of Canada is an independent union formed by working women to organize those occupations which have been ignored by the traditional trade unions. It grew out of the Working Women's Association, which in 1971 began doing support work for working women's struggle and public education regarding equal pay, day care, job security and other concerns of working women.

Following a series of seminars in 1972 about "How to form a union", the Working Women's Association did just that. In October of 1972, a Founding Convention of 24 women approved the constitution of the new union.

The purpose of the new union was to organize workers in retail stores, offices, banks, restaurants and other places which employ mostly women. Since only 34% of working women in B.C. belong to unions, it was felt that an independent union run by women workers themselves was necessary. The constitution was designed to make the union as democratic as possible and prevent the establishment of a well paid professional bureaucracy who had forgotten what it was like to work. All officers are elected by referendum ballot and there is a restriction on the number of years people can run for a full-time paid position with the union. The union also makes a practice of voting on all important decisions by a referendum ballot mailed to each member's home. Another important aspect of the SORWUC constitution is the autonomy of local bargaining units. The members in each bargaining unit are responsible for writing and negotiating their own contracts as well as retaining all control over any negotiating strategy such as strikes.

SORWUC is a National union and our constitution allows us to organize workers anywhere in Canada. The National Executive has the authority to charter autonomous Locals or Sections of SORWUC and also often initiates new organizing. There are two United Bank Worker Sections for bank employees in SORWUC; one in Saskatchewan and the other in B.C. Workers in all other industries are presently in Local #1, which has 12 active certified bargaining units and approximately 180 members.

LOCAL 1, SORWUC:

SORWUC's first certification application was approved in July 1973, when the B.C. Labour Relations Board ruled that SORWUC was indeed a "trade union in the meaning of the Act" and could bargain on behalf of employees in a small legal office. This remained SORWUC's only bargaining unit for another year.

In the meantime, SORWUC continued to do support actions such as assisting the Wardair strikers and organizing a boycott campaign in support of the striking workers at Denny's Restaurant. SORWUC members also supported (and some participated in) the organizing drive by the Association of University & College Employees (AUCE) at the University of B.C. This union was organized by UBC's clerical and library workers themselves, 90% of whom are women. The drive was carried out successfully without any outside financial assistance and resulted in one of the best union contracts for clerical and library workers in Canada. It proved that not only should working women organize themselves, they could organize themselves!

Beginning in 1974, Local 1 of SORWUC was certified to represent a number of social service agencies, day care centres and several more small offices. Some of these units have raised perplexing problems in that the immediate "employer" has no control over money: funds are provided through government grants or subsidies. The government, by hiding behind so-called independent societies, is refusing to assume any responsibility for the financial welfare of employees who are paid by grants that the government hands out. Thus, negotiating a wage increase with the "employer" is only half the battle, as this must be followed by asking the government for additional funds.

Day care centres are a case in point. The employees of the day care centres which are bargaining units of Local 1, are working with their "employers" (usually non-profit societies composed of parents) on how best to achieve quality day care, which includes

decent wages for the employees. Some day care workers make as little as \$500. a month take home pay. Still, because there is a limit on the amount of subsidy that the B.C. provincial government will give a parent for day care costs, and because there is a limit on the amount that parents, especially single parents can deduct for day care expenses on their income tax returns, the day care workers are forced either to demand wages from the pockets of parents (who are mainly single working women) or go without adequate wages until the government changes its policies.

Nevertheless, the contracts which some of the units in SORWUC Local 1 have negotiated include a few unusual clauses which are of great importance to women workers for example:

- * A shorter work week (32 hours in a law office & 33 hours in a credit union)
- * Personal rights clauses which provide that the boss cannot regulate employees' dress, and cannot ask employees to perform personal services such as bringing coffee, typing personal letters, taking clothes to the drycleaners, etc.
- * Full pay for maternity leave
- * Two weeks paternity leave for fathers with pay
- * Extra time at lunch once a month, with no loss of pay, for a union meeting. This enables people with home responsibilities to attend the meetings and participate in the union, thus maintaining union democracy.

These contracts also contain provisions which are generally found in all union contracts: job security, a grievance procedure, promotions according to seniority, experience and ability, and of course, better wages.

In 1977, Local 1 applied for certification for two neighbourhood pubs in Vancouver; 'Bimini's' and 'Jerry's Cove'. The experience at Bimini's showed us how to deal with a typical problem facing small units who serve the public... a very anti-union employer who would have no difficulty bringing in newly hired employees (ie: scabs!) in the event of a strike. The strike was 10 weeks in duration, and during that time, the waitresses successfully fought off an attempt by an American 'business' union to break their strike. The Hotel, Restaurant and Bartenders Union, Local 40, crossed the picket line and signed up the scabs who were working inside the pub. They then attempted to get the B.C. Labour Relations Board to decertify SORWUC as the bargaining agent, but within days, the B.C. Federation of Labour and other trade unions rallied behind SORWUC and forced this so-called "union" to stop their strike-breaking tactics. Also, it became apparent that although the Employer was losing a lot of business because of the strike, he was rich enough and anti-union enough to hold out 'until the end'. However, by building a customer boycott campaign against the pub, and making a real and successful effort to get support on the picket line from other unionists, women's groups and individual customers of the pub, the waitresses were able to cut the business by approximately 80%. The employees won and returned to work with a first contract which not only removed a tremendous amount of the arbitrary power of management, but also gave them a say in the scheduling of their hours and gave them an increase in the base wage from \$3.50/hr to \$5.03/hr. Because of our successful battle with Bimini's, our members at the other neighbourhood pub, 'Jerry's Cove' are having a much easier time in negotiations with their employer.

UNITED BANK WORKERS:

During the summer of 1976, SORWUC was approached by bank workers who wanted to unionize. Within two months, employees in 11 bank branches in B.C. had joined the union and it was decided to charter a separate autonomous Local for bank workers called the United Bank Workers, Local #2, SORWUC. On September 26, 1976, Local 2 was granted a Charter, the by-laws were drawn up and passed, and an Executive consisting entirely of bank workers was elected. Organizing now began in earnest.

In April 1977, after SORWUC had submitted applications to the Canada Labour Relations Board (CLRB), to represent employees in more than 20 bank branches and a data centre, the Board finally held hearings to determine what would constitute an appropriate unit for collective bargaining in the banks. During the hearings, the Banks requested a ruling from the CLRB which would require the majority of bank employees in Canada to join a union; in other words, that the nation was the appropriate bargaining unit. SORWUC and its lawyers argued that in a large unorganized industry like the banking industry, too large a bargaining unit would prevent employees from exercising their rights to unionize. We argued that the branch was an appropriate bargaining unit.

In June, the CLRB made its decision. Ruling in favour of the union's position, that a bank branch was an appropriate bargaining unit, the Board stated: "The express intention of Parliament is 'the encouragement of free collective bargaining'.. Too large units in unorganized industries will abort any possibility of collective bargaining ever commencing and defeat the express intention of Parliament". For the first time, employees of chartered banks in Canada won the right to bargain collectively for wages and working conditions.

Since the Board's decisions, the United Bank Workers has grown quickly. In August 1977, because of our rapid growth and the expansion of our organizing campaign into almost every part of B.C., we requested a Charter from the National Union Executive as a Section of SORWUC. As a Section of SORWUC, the United Bank Workers is made up of all union members who work in banks in B.C. and it has a geographic sub-structure of organizing committees throughout the province. The organizing committees will eventually become Locals within the UBW Section.

We have had some setbacks... votes were lost in 14 of the original 20 branches largely due to the long delay between our applications for certification and the Board's decision. However, at the time of writing (Feb. 1978) 24 branches have been certified and have commenced negotiating with the Banks for a first collective agreement. Bank workers from all over B.C. have met to discuss contract proposals and all UBW members voted on the proposals by a series of mailed referendum ballots. These contract proposals include a base rate of \$1140. a month, 4 weeks of vacation in the first year of employment, a standard work week of 35 hours, voluntary overtime to be paid at double time, promotions on the basis of seniority and ability, and pro-rated benefits for part-time employees. The base wage proposal was arrived at by calculating what a single parent with one child would need in order to support her/himself.

The UBW Section in B.C. has decided to stop applying for branches and has launched a campaign to sign up the majority of bank employees throughout B.C. and apply for the province as the bargaining unit. Since the UBW now has over 600 members in B.C., we feel it is possible to actually sign up the majority of bank employees in the province... the organizing campaign is being launched at all banks, and in some banks, our members will only have to sign up an average of 3 or 4 other employees in order to apply for this provincial unit. The provincial organizing drive now means that bank employees can sign up individually rather than branch by branch. The 24 branches will continue to negotiate with the Banks, but it is obvious to UBW members that our bargaining power will increase immensely if we have a majority of bank employees in the province 'with us' at the negotiating table.

Organizing has also spread into Saskatchewan, The Bank employees in that province are organized into their own Section of SORWUC and have active organizing committees in Regina and Saskatoon.

SORWUC's priority is organizing in industries which primarily employ women. In order to reach our goals, we encourage both working men and women to join with us and build our own union.

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