

You Can't Scare Me. . I'm Stickin' to the Union

Union Women in British Columbia during the Great Depression

Background

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 labor power, but also play a role as wage laborers. These two distinct functions developed for Canadian working class women with the industrialization of the Canadian economy. Previous to this, the family, despite the sexual division of labor 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; facilitating the daily and generational reproduction of labor power. 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 labor market became that of a 'reserve army of labor'. 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.

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(Ed. note: for important background material for this article, see the sidebar (in italics), which runs in the outside columns.)

By 1939 there were 1,121 organized women workers in B.C., out of a female working population of approximately 26,000. 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.

The constraints on organizing

The position of women in the labor 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 labor 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 labor movement. Many unionists believed that women were 'backwards'.

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 labor market. Both male and female attitudes towards women's labor 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.

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.

In 1930, only 15 per cent of the paid labor force in Canada was organized. This figure rose to 16 per cent in 1935, and 18 per cent by 1940.

In 1929 28,000 workers in B.C. were unionists, divided between the Trades and Labor Congress and the All Canadian Congress of Labor, a small national body. This membership figure had declined to 21,207 workers by 1932.

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).

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 lose and so much



to gain:

Her mouth tightened again. And d'ya think it's easy for me? If I'm working 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.

(Left Hand, Right Hand, by D.Livesay)

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 per cent of all clerical workers; 78 per cent of all teachers; the majority of restaurant employees; 8.5 per cent of manual workers; 2.1 per cent of agricultural

Unemployment had a detrimental effect on the unions in B.C. The Vancouver and New Westminster District Trades and Labor Congress lost 40 per cent of its members in the first two years of the Depression. The craft unions turned their backs on the unemployed. Between 1931 and 1935 however, real wages rose by 18 per cent, due to the combativity of trade unionists.

Workers' Unity League

The organizing attempts of the 1930's were led, in part by the Workers Unity League, a member of the Red International of Labor 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.

The Workers' Unity League 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 labor. It also established the Fish and Cannery Workers Industrial Union in 1933, encompassing women workers.

Of 189 strikes across the country in 1934, 109 were led by the WUL. In B.C. the WUL was most successful in organizing and leading the unemployed. By 1935 the Communist Party had adopted a Popular Front position. Motivated by the emergence of the Committee for Industrial Organization in the

workers; and 69.2 per cent of personal service workers.

In B.C., women formed 9.75 per cent of the B.C. labor force in 1931 and 10.04 per cent of it in 1932.

These figures denote two things: women were a significant part of the provincial and national labor force. 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 (Sept. 15, 1931) rebut her arguments. This woman argues against the exploitation of women by women. She suggests that women have a right to jobs 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 creches. 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."

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

The popular belief as to the sudden invasion of the labor market by wo-

U.S., the CPC led WUL unions back into the TLC (AFL). This resulted in a 30 per cent rise in the Vancouver and District Labor Council membership by 1935. The labor movement in the province began to organize around health insurance and the right to organize.

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 8,200 members in 1935 (60 per cent of whom were unemployed). By 1939 there were 16,000 adherents (Although it lost 10 to 15 per cent of its members with the Hitler-Stalin pact). 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 B.C., 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 33 1/2 per cent of the vote (? MLAs). The international unions nationally endorsed the CCF. Its program differed from the CPC's in its adherence to a peaceful transition to socialism through economic cooperation and its rejection of the Soviet Union.

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.

men in recent years is not in accordance with the facts.

Dorothy Livesay in Right Hand, Left Hand describes attitudes toward 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.*

Despite these restrictions, wives of union militants were drawn into major struggles; Livesay documents the central role of women in winning the Corbin B.C. miners' strike in 1935. Attitudes towards working women were better within the Communist wing of the labor 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 five day week; maternity leave, special compensation for women; 100 per cent unionization; the abolition of sweatshops, decent wages and class unity. These concentrate on the superexploitation of women workers. WUL saw the inclusion of women within the wage labor 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.

Women's Labor Leagues

The Women's Labor Leagues were affiliates of the WUL. These were launched by the CPC in an attempt to unite working women, unorganized workers and housewives. The WUL program included free birth control clinics, the organization of the unorganized; maternity insurance; relief grant increases; adequate food; housing; medical and dental care for children;

The Trades and Labor 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.

The year 1934 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 rely on the government.

Minimum wage debates

In 1935 the debate on Minimum Wage Laws continued. Resolution 14 called for a minimum of \$14 per 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 the 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.

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.

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."

In 1932, out of 48,179 paid working women in Canada, 3,939 were union

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 war-time production would be able to sabotage imperialist intervention. The WUL indicted the labor movement for its previous failures:

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

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.

Women also attended as representatives of various pro-labor support groups, such as the Housewives' League. Women do appear as delegates for some unions, through the decade. The fishing industry had a significant history of militancy throughout the 1930's.

In 1937 women working in the Namu cannery struck to defend the struggles of Native and Japanese fishermen. White workers crossed the picket lines. Despite this, an increase of \$1 per ticket was established. In the same year women organized in Alaska canneries (Kitchikan) and won equal pay with male workers. The Fisherman of Nov. 8, 1938 states:

Women were used in many industries by employers as cheap labor 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"

WOMEN ORGANIZING IN THE 30's



A May Day parade in the '30s

Vancouver Public Library

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.

By 1938, there were 21,488 organized women workers in Canada. Of these women 1,371 were in B.C. By 1939, the province's figure had fallen to 1,121.

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 Association and Beverage Dispensers #28; Retail Clerks International Protective Association #279; Stenographers, Typists, Bookkeepers

of union activity. Only one example of a woman fisher can be found in the union's press in this period.

Fishing industry militancy

The Oct. 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 four 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

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. ■

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.

Women workers organized in other sectors of the food industry as well. In 1934, the only 'agricultural struggle in years' was begun by hop-pickers in Sardis and Chilliwack over living conditions and wages. It involved fewer than one hundred workers.

Strike in the hop fields

The next year the hops field exploded. Based on the last years victory which raised rates from 20¢ to 30¢ an hour (3¢ above the Minimum Wage in the sector), 1,500 workers went on strike in Chilliwack. Women and men, 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 labor intervene to improve conditions. The strike was lost. This is an example of a struggle involving both women and men.

An article in the Pacific Advocate of Sept. 2, 1938 describes the terrible conditions in agriculture: whole families (again mostly Native) worked for 13 hours per day and 55¢ per day per adult in the Agassiz area. The article called 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¢ per hour to 25¢.

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 labor 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 Trades Labor Council Congresses suggest that working conditions were below health standards.

A strike of waitresses from Feb. 23 to March 16, 1931, involved workers in two restaurants. Their central demand was opposition to proposed 20 per cent wage reductions (from \$15 to \$12 an 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 locals of the Hotel, Restaurant Employees and Beverage Dispensers 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, eight hour day and six 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 program. 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 for women and men who worked the same job the union won equal pay.

The next year, a strike from Aug. 29 to Sept. 5 of women workers won an increase in pay and a reduction of hours. The Deutschland Cafe was struck on Feb. 18 1936. On April 27, a mass support meeting was built by the HREU. 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 eight hour day, an end to harassment 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 Dec. 1, agreements had been signed with the King's Cafe and the Pall Mall.

White Lunch strike

These small strikes continued through 1937. In May the White Lunch 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-labor people. White Lunch workers demanded \$14/week (from \$9.50). Despite an immediate victory, the union was lost six 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

ACCL (All Canadian Congress of Labor). In June of 1937 there was dual organization at Scott's Cafe by both the HREU and the United Hotel and Restaurant Employees Association (ACCL). This resulted in a long struggle at Scott's one which the union eventually won.

The Pacific Advocate refers 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. Strikes in New Westminster and Vancouver resulted in union recognition and reinstatement of union organizers.

Losing restaurants

Despite these victories, it was all too easy to lose union recognition due to turnover and harassment: in November 1937 the HREU had lost the Stella Cafe, Waldorf, Peter Pan and Eden restaurants. The B.C. Worker describes another struggle: one by 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 Vancouver District Trade Labor Council 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 as early as 1931 suggests that domestic service created extreme hardships for women with children to look after, because it generally meant rooming away.

Domestic workers: abysmal conditio

Conditions in 1935 were abysmal; a result of the large surplus labor force. Women worked 60 to 80 hours a week, board and wages amounted to \$30 per month, for experienced help and \$20 for inexperienced. Some women in 1936 to 1937 earned as little as \$5 per 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 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 Domestic Workers Union 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.

The union called for Minimum Wages, a union hiring bureau to regulate standards in the sector, protective legislation and training programs. It also supported health insurance and accident compensation, contemporary demands of the labor movement. The drive was supported by sundry women's organizations including the Mother's Council and the Women's Labor League. By 1937, the union had signed up 400 out of 1,500 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 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."

This statement was taken up by Alderwoman Helena Gutteridge and by Ald. 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).

The campaign continued with a high public profile. At a public meeting on Nov. 13, 1937 Mildred Duggan, an

officer of the union said: *Employers are looking for bargains in maids just like shoppers.* 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 labor market and force up domestics' wages. The CCF developed a bill on domestic workers' rights. That year the union won a \$10 per month raise, a room charge of \$2 to \$3; meals reduced to \$4; a 48 hour week; time and a half for overtime, but could not win inclusion in the Minimum Wage Laws. Meanwhile women's groups campaigned door to door for support.

Garment workers

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 40 hour week for its members from 44 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 whose task it was to sell

such products. In 1935 the B.C. Workers New 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.

Saleswomen organizing

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 Fisherman 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." 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.

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. 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 Nanaimo, 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.

This militancy fits into the context of massive urban struggles of the

1930's, primarily those of the unemployed.

Women organized without leadership from the established unions. The Trades Labor Council 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 labor 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 large weight of women in manufacturing resulted in a competition between unions to organize them, in B.C. there were no such pressures.

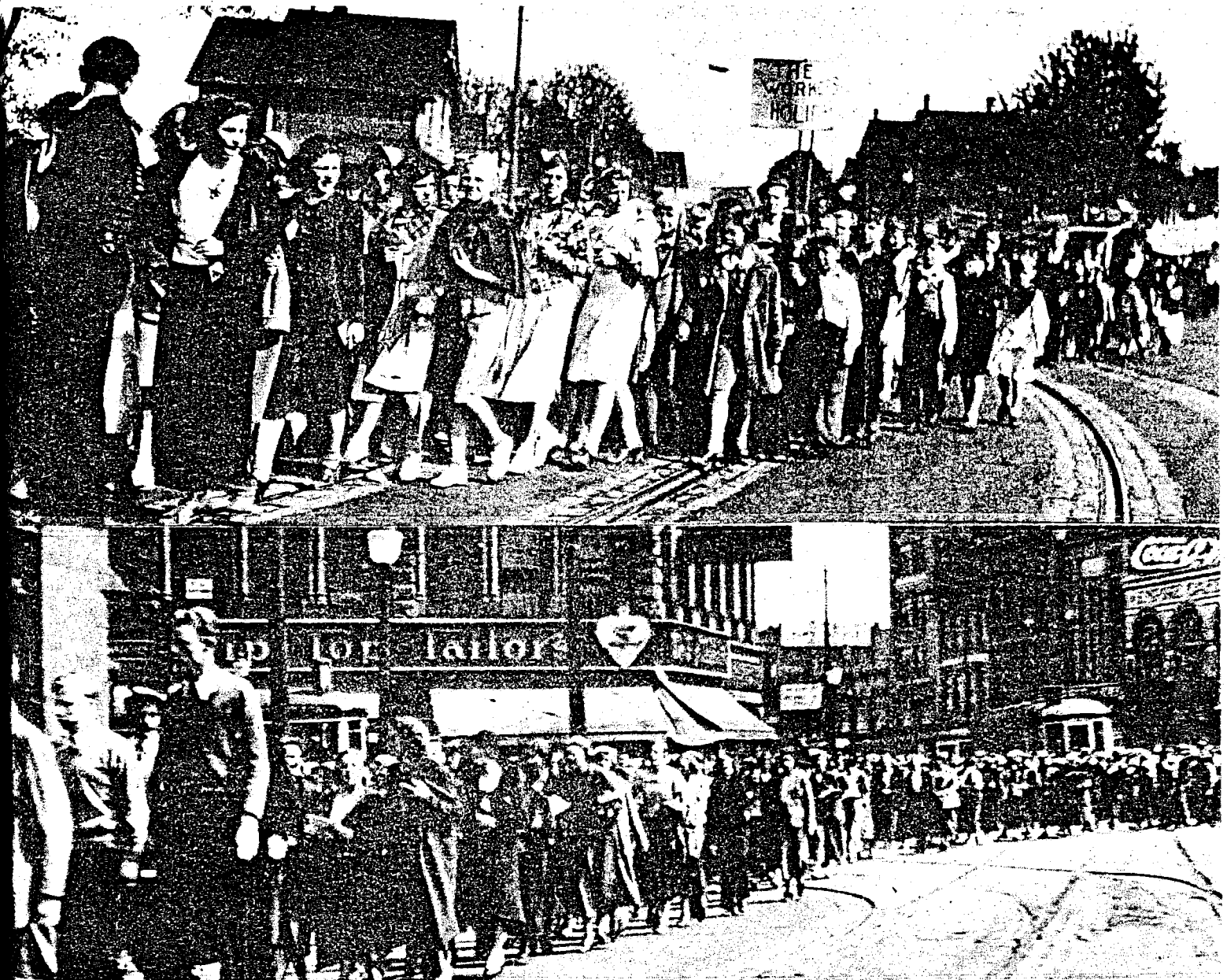
Rather, when women were organized it was in support of men's struggles or through the efforts of the Communists, and primarily, women themselves.

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.

Women's issues were ones of basic survival

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 labor. 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 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. ●



1930's march of the unemployed