

1920s

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now in (longhand
part 2)

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Consumer goods production, communications and service ~~sect~~ employing women grew in the 1920's as union workers gained higher wages from corporations who had realized the importance of the domestic market. While women's job opportunities grew, the rationalization, and deskilling ~~of~~ of women's jobs also increased. Unionism was inhibited in offices ~~of~~ telephone companies ~~where~~ where every word and gesture was monitored and sped up. On the other hand, the nature of some service work, such as ~~wait~~ waitressing for a working class clientele in cafes, opened avenues of communication for women through daily contact with ~~the~~ union men. One woman talked of gaining her union consciousness during the 1925 longshoremen's strike. ~~The~~ The cafe owners where she ~~worked~~ was a waitress served scabs- union men came in and through discussing the key issues in the strike convinced ~~her~~ her to cut off their service.

The fluctuating demand ~~for~~ for women's labour combined with women's limited experience in the workplace, and experience dependent on lifecycle as well as economic cycle, ^{This well} may ~~well~~ have ~~limited~~ limited the development of a committed work identity amongst women.

the ways

Bryan Plamer suggests that working life had an impact on ~~the way~~ that family life was organized, both in terms of resources (~~economic, time~~) (economic, time) and structure (frequency of contact for example). These effects would be most evident when entire families were employed in an industry, or when separation was required for survival, such as the case of young women who hired out as domestics. The commonly held belief that women's place was in the home meant that their workforce involvement was seen as secondary ~~and~~ and their income supplementary. When combined with the view of men as wage earners, this provided a strong rationale for low wages for women, for they worked, after all, for "pin money".

The growth of workers wages and social reform of the 1920s was both a result of ongoing pressure for the organized labour and workers' political movement and a realization by capital of the need for ~~the~~ home markets. The working class family, according to ~~W. E. B.~~ Ewen, became increasingly geared to consumption. Despite higher wages, the majority of Canadian workers did continue to earn

below \$1,000 per year, well below the poverty lines. Nonetheless, advertising and social attitudes began to suggest that working class people could enjoy leisure time and consumer goods once exclusively ^{ely} the terrain of the middle and upper class.

While domestic ~~labour~~ labour remained a heavy burden for women, appliances began to appear on the market. Decreased hours of work probably helped women who were both homemakers and workers to stay in the labour force, beginning the trend to married and divorced women entering the wage labour force. They filled the growing number of service jobs.

Conditions of Women's Work

X Women workers faced two distinct sets of problems in the ways that their workplaces structured their work experience. Women worked in either fragmented, isolated small shops, offices or homes, under strict paternalistic (or in the case of domestics, maternalistic ^{ic}) supervision. Women were forced, at worst, to toil at home or in others' homes. It was difficult to locate one's co-workers. Alternately, women found employment with large corporations, for example, telephone companies. Women's work was the subject of constant rationalization, or "Taylorism", that is technological change, deskilling and continual speed-up. The modern office was "a highly rationalized ~~office~~ office in which deskilled jobs were defined as suitable for women's work." Phillips ~~The~~

The central expense for both small employers and large industries was women's wages. It was for this reason that women experienced such intense ~~and~~ rationalization and speed-up of work and an unprecedented hostility to their organizing attempts. Employers were almost always male and accustomed, as well, to ~~the~~ female subordination. The notion that women would organize was a direct challenge to this authority. Although B.C. women and men shared employment by large anti-union companies, their conditions of work differed. Star Rosenthal sums up women's work location in this period as "scattered, ^{fragmented,} ~~fragmented,~~ no space to congregate, no access to public life, no transportation to work, no childcare, and long hours of work."

In B.C., with a few exceptions, male and female workers experienced an extreme separation as to where and how they worked. Even when men and women shared a labour force women were

strictly relegated to the bottom rungs of the work hierarchy. This separation led to a general lack of imagination on the part of men as to the conditions of women's work and the real personalities of female workers. It was even more difficult to imagine why women would need and want to unionize.

This was a time of growing unity and strength for the B.C. labour movement. The B.C. Federation of Labour united all but the I.W.W. and rail brotherhoods. Crafts unions grew with a spurt in construction. The boom of the early '10s collapsed as Canada moved into World War I. International markets evaporated leaving in their wake high unemployment. In 1915 there were riots on breadlines in Vancouver. As union membership fell with lay-offs, workers resorted to legislation and political alternatives to meet their needs. Labour candidates endorsed women's suffrage, an end to assistance immigration, the establishment of a workers' compensation board, and eight hour day and public relief works.

Western labour was well-organized and radical; it was able to win a far-reaching influence within the Trades and Labour Congress. One of B.C.'s central concerns was that the government would bring in conscription. Unions feared that the conscription of labour would logically follow in the wake of the conscription of soldiers. Union rights would be bypassed by wartime labour legislation. This fear of weakened bargaining rights combined with the belief that this was a war for imperialist spoils not for human liberty.

Before the outbreak of the war the Western unions were able to win an anti-conscription position within the TLCC. The BCFL, VTLC, ~~the~~ ^{Victoria} TLC and the NWTL all opposed conscription/ National ~~the~~ policy favouring women's suffrage and the workers' compensation also passed. By the beginning of the war the TLCC had retreated from its anti-war stance. The B.C. labour ~~movement~~ ^{movement} experienced an 83% rise in membership, as war industries developed.

Discussion of the direct action ~~the~~ general strike ~~the~~ tactic had gone on for some time in the province's labour movement. If the government imposed conscription unions argued that they should walk off the job. However, the actual level of support amongst the rank and file for such action was inadequate to back the tactic.

Parallel to this discussion of strike action was the escalation of independent labour politics. Labour candidates, running on an anti-war programme polled minimal votes in the 1917(?) election. This was seen as partly the fault of women, limited suffrage had been granted to the ~~wives~~ wives of soldiers. These

Unorganized workers, ~~both~~ both women and men, joined the strike out of conviction. The union movement ~~it~~ used this opportunity to appeal to workers to join a union. This appeal was directed at women in the public sector. Government charwomen at the Tuxedo Hospital earned all of \$1.16 per day. After carfare was deducted the women had all of \$1.06 for food, clothing and rent. The bulletin believed ~~that~~ ^{that} it was "high time" that they formed a union. The article exclaims: "One dollar and sixteen cents a day for scrubbing floors and then the bosses profess not to know the cause of labour unrest." Only a living wage could allow workers access to education, housing, general culture and "~~healthful~~" "healthful amusement".

~~Housewives~~ Housewives were also active in their ~~support~~ support for the strike. The Ways and Means Committee of the Women's Labour League set up ~~up~~ took over the dining room of the Strathcona Hotel with the full support of management. They set up an eatery where "girl" strikers could eat. ~~for working~~ Recognizing that women's low wages ~~and~~ lack of strike funds meant that they were impoverished the women ~~and~~ could eat free of charge, while male strikers were welcomed but asked for a ^{full} donation or payment. The kitchen continued successfully until ~~Mr.~~ Mr. W.J. Christie, a local financier, forced the women out by threatening to foreclose on the hotel's mortgage. The women moved to a new location. *Women supporters & strikers helped to establish relief for striking workers.*

High hopes for an early settlement faded and the strikers found themselves with massive public support, but little resources and intense repression from the ~~militia~~ militia.

~~Leaders~~ Leaders of the strike were arrested and held in prison. A Mrs. Armstrong was held for three days, charged with "inciting to disorder" and committed for trial. It is clear that the government believed that women's role was important enough to warrant repression.

After six weeks, despite sympathy strikes in other cities, the strikers were forced to back down and return to work. While many unions were able to protect

t their members against reprisals, retail store owners refused to reinstate striking "girl" clerks. Unions gathered funds to help the women fight for. "This union came out to support the other strikers. Now they are locked out." Unfortunately, (experiencing extreme victimization, this pattern, of weaker, younger unions, with female members was to repeat itself in the Vancouver sympathy strike.

There is far less evidence of women's involvement in the Vancouver strike, which ran through June of 1919. There are ~~several~~ several reasons for this. Women were fewer in number and more isolated in Vancouver than in Winnipeg. Their unions had faced great instability; women would organize, (recognition, union hiring, fight for wages, and conditions, and then lose their new conditions and their union because of employer and harrassment, high turnover, ~~in male industries~~ in male industries ~~Unions~~ dominated the labour scene in Vancouver. The strike leadership did not want to challenge government authority by shutting down essential services, choosing rather to cripple the economy. They also exempted newer, female-dominated unions from the strike, in part because they provided services and because they were afraid that they women were "too new to unionism". This retail clerks, laundry workers, hospital workers, and hotel and restaurant employees were to remain at work. Telephone operators were also to remain at work until the strike needed them as an additional pressure on the government. When scabbing was organized against the striking street car workers and civic workers were threatened with firing by city council, the ~~strike~~ strike committee called the newly reorganized telephone operators' local into the fray.

These women became the labour heroines of the Vancouver strike. The ^{original} demands of the Vancouver workers were far reaching. They fought not only in defense of the strike in Winnipeg, but for the nationalization of major utilities, a six hour work day to cut across post-war unemployment and for the right to collective bargaining, closed shops and living wages. Unfortunately, in the face of government opposition the strike soon became a struggle to defend ~~the~~ striking workers against victimization.

~~_____~~ As June came to a close most workers were able to return to work without harrassment. However, the telephone company threatened to demote striking supervisors and senior operators. All but five workers at the phone exchange had walked off the job, ~~_____~~ locking ~~_____~~ the doors and throwing thier keys ~~in~~ behind them. The returned workers would face not only loss of ~~_____~~ status and wages but would also be forced to work with strikebreakers the company ^{had} hire^d. The operators released the rest of the general strikers from their defense, stating that they 'could fight the discrimination matter ^h themselves". ~~_____~~ Company linesmen and technicians stayed out with the operators for an additional ~~_____~~ two weeks. The workers finally ~~_____~~ returned without winning protection for the ~~_____~~ women. Company ~~_____~~ harrassment and the inability of the weakened union to defend the women led to the loss of the operators' local after several years. The women had won the respect of the labour movement: "The action of the telephone girls in responding to the call for a general strike has placed them in a class by themselves amongst workers in this province". ~~_____~~ ~~_____~~ would ~~_____~~ have ~~_____~~ been wiser on the part of the "hello girls" and certainly on the part of the stronger industrial unions to stay out until the women could return to work without penalty.

When reviewing these early strikes it is important to understand that conditions then and now are not the same ~~_____~~ Unions had few economic resources, ~~_____~~ the tradition of women's organization was not as firmly implanted as to=day and both Winnipeg and Vancouver misjudged the length of time that would be needed to win these strikes. However, the importance of public support, union administration of essential services, ~~_____~~ the protection of workers threatened with Job loss, ~~_____~~ the responsibility of the entrie trade union movement to defend all those who participate in or supprt the strike, ^{the involvement of those who work within the home, and} the need for a realistic and developed strategy ~~_____~~ may well be key compnents to a successful general strike in 1983.

to strike. Vancouver struck not only against the use of the militia and for reinstatement of the workers but for a comprehensive political programme

Demands included the 6 hour day and the nationalization of major food reserves ~~to prevent hoarding~~. Some 10,000 workers ^{went} ~~on strike~~ ;

The union decided to realize women workers in the first strike.

In the second strike, ~~the~~ The strike lasted a month, from the beginning to the end of June. Most workers who returned to their ^{jobs} ~~to~~ ~~work~~ did not experience victimization; the exception was the ~~only~~ women's union allowed to join the ^{strike} ~~strike~~.
The telephone workers local.

SEE General strike stuff

Minimum Wages for women workers. It was they who had established laws which penalized men ^{who} raped or seduced young women with two years imprisonment, while cattle rustlers faced fourteen years in jail. It was they who treated their women employees with less respect ~~than~~ than that given prostitutes and forced ~~them~~ them into "starvation, suicide or shame" ~~because~~ because of indecently low wages.

The Winnipeg strikers began to administer necessary services to insure the well-being of working class communities. A food committee was established to "feed union men and women". Milk delivery and access to food ~~was~~ ^d disappeared as workers in those sectors remained off the job. The strikers first convinced the city to ~~set~~ set up food and milk depots. They then decided that it was more efficient if the Teamster drivers actually continued with ~~deliveries~~ deliveries as they had before the strike, but under workers' control. ~~They~~

This way they ^{were} able to insure that the limited supplies of bread and milk reached young children, nursing mothers, the sick and the elderly. These actions cut across the Committee of 1000's hysterical reports of starving children ^{and dying older people,} and won the

unionists support from housewives. *Similarly, when hydro lines were downed by a storm, electrical workers restored power, reminding the public that it was "the jobs of the women's men on strike to carry out vital services to the community."*

Women strikers experienced harassment from their bosses on the picket line. *community*

~~According to the~~ According to the bulletins, Bertha Newman was a "fragile young girl". Mt. H.L. MacKinnon the husky owner of MacKinnon Co. Ltd. "so marred the little girl that she had one arm in a sling for a week", when she picketed outside the Coca Cola Building where MacKinnon worked. The "little girl" was courageous enough to take MacKinnon to court and win her case. The description entails genuine sympathy for this woman, but it also calls on feminine fragility ~~and~~ vulnerability to win public empathy.

Female strikers were wise in their use of tactics. The Winnipeg telephone operators had been on strike the year before. At that time the company had hired the "daughters of the wealthy" to work as strikebreakers. When the operators walked out in 1919 they pulled all the fuses out of the ^{equipment and} switchboards, including the PVX, insuring that Winnipeg was without telephones for the duration of the conflict.

Several weeks into the Vancouver strike an important conference took place in Calgary. While the Western Conference was initially only to prepare for a radical stance at the TLC, it in fact, resulted in a breakaway: the creation of the One Big Union. The ~~break~~^{rupture} centred on the debate between industrial and craft unions, with the West representing the radical industrial spirit and the Centre, the ~~craft~~ conservative craft traditions. The OBU was aggressive in its organizing stance, inclusive in who it chose to organize; it developed a decentralized structure, with recall and referendum procedures ^{voting} ~~in~~ ^{in regards to} ~~the~~ ^{the} ~~leaders~~ ⁱⁿ or major decisions.

The Lumberworkers Industrial Union was the most successful affiliate. Through their organization loggers made significant improvements in camp conditions. Industrial ^{(as did the Van. TLC, Prince Rupert TLC and District 6 of the Mine, Mill and Smelter Wkrs. unions, teamsters and some trades joined,} Employers blacklisted OBU members; they refused to negotiate with the union. Members found themselves in the difficult position of belonging to both International unions and the OBU. The Internationals were able to negotiate with the employers because they ~~are familiar~~^{contractual} had previously established relationships with them. ~~Many~~ ^{holdings} ~~Unionists~~ ^{found that in} dual memberships, ~~in~~ order

* By 1920 the OBU had 41,000 members in ~~Canada~~ Canada; of these 29 locals were in British Columbia ~~and~~ with 19,064 members.

to work ~~they found that~~ they had to leave the OBU and honour their international union card.

Through early 1920 the OBU sustained its momentum. The economy was strong and unionists were caught between struggles to establish new gains and the growing factionalism within the labour movement. Disillusion had set in after the defeat of the Winnipeg general strike. The traditional craft unions and internationals regrouped in 1919, forming a new Vancouver labour council in August. It encompassed 9 unions with a membership of 5,000 by the end of 1920. It was led by trade unionists who had long-respected records: Helena Gutteridge, Bert Showler and McVity. ~~It focused~~^{was} on political lobbying, the development of the Federated Labour Party, and work with returned men to cut across the anti-union sentiment which had so dominated this group. It revived the racist traditions ~~with~~ of anti-Orientalism

~~had~~ been which had temporarily buried by the industrial unions. Both labour groups were in conflict, yet ~~ne~~ both were more radical than their counterparts in Central Canada.

In late 1920 the ~~K~~umberworkers International Union left the OBU over structural and monetary differences. In the eastern coal fields, the OBU competed with the UMWA and lost the battle because of employers recognition of the International. The economy lost its momentum by the end of the year. Craft workers were first hit. There were 6,000 unemployed in ~~V~~ancouver alone. Cambie Street Parade Ground became a relief camp. The OBU was successful in organizing the unemployed. Both working class political parties, the Socialist Party and the Federated Labour Party were also worked with this group.

The new VTLC launched a massive and popular anti-Oriental campaign throughout B.C. They believed that it was Oriental immigration which had created a lack of jobs for native Canadians. They helped to create the Asiatic Exclusion League which toured B.C. debating the Socialist Party. The latter argued that workers all over the world and country were hard hit by inflation, the problem was not race or immigration but (job creation) and profits. The craft unions and internationals refused membership to ~~the~~ unemployed workers in their trades. Again they ran into conflict with the industrial left-wing movement who argued that unions had a responsibility to look after their unemployed ~~in~~ members as well as those paying dues and at work. Despite the appeal of these politics to large sectors of the province's working people, the OBU was unable to sustain its base, succumbing ~~to~~ to internal division and pressure from employers.