

## The Communist Party and the Woman Question, 1922-1929

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# The Communist Party and the Woman Question, 1922-1929

Joan Sangster

"IS FEMINISM DEAD?" was the question posed by mass magazines like *Maclean's* after the success of suffrage and the decline of the Canadian feminist movement in the 1920s.<sup>1</sup> Observers often responded in the affirmative; even feminists like Nellie McClung bemoaned the dearth of interest in the "old" feminist issues of pre-war days.<sup>2</sup> Yet a concern for women's rights had not vanished from Canadian political life, for in the 1920s and 1930s newly-formed communist and socialist parties debated and promoted the cause of women's equality. Indeed, as Linda Kealey has recently shown, even before World War I small groups of socialists, organized separately from the middle-class suffrage movement, had championed women's emancipation.<sup>3</sup> Picking up the thin strands of tradition from these pre-war labour and socialist parties, the Communist Party of Canada (CPC), and later the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) — two parties differing in their approach to socialism and often quarrelling with each other — took up the banner of women's equality in Canadian society.<sup>4</sup>

The initial objectives proclaimed by the nascent Communist Party in its manifesto of 1921<sup>5</sup> and its founding programme of 1922 made no specific

<sup>1</sup> A.A. Perry, "Is Woman Suffrage a Fizzle?" *Maclean's*, 1 February 1928.

<sup>2</sup> V. Strong-Boag, "Canadian Feminism in the 1920s: The Case of Nellie McClung," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 12, 4 (1977).

<sup>3</sup> Linda Kealey, "Canadian Socialism and the Woman Question, 1900-14," *Labour/Le Travail*, 13 (1984), 77-101. See also Janice Newton, "Women and *Cotton's Weekly*: A Study of Women and Socialism in Canada, 1909," in *Resources for Feminist Research*, 8 (1979), 58-61.

<sup>4</sup> This paper is part of a larger study of women in the CPC and CCF from the 1920s to the 1950s. For the sake of brevity I have neglected an extensive comparison between the CPC and pre-CCF women's labourite and socialist groups. I have also omitted a detailed discussion of women's motives in joining the Communist Party, as well as biographies of leading Communists like Annie Buller and Becky Buhay. The latter topic, I believe, fits better into a discussion of the CPC after 1929.

<sup>5</sup> At the time, the Communist Party was called the Workers Party of Canada.

mention of woman's inequality in Canadian society or her role in the revolutionary movement. Within two years, however, the Communist Party of Canada (CPC) had set up a Women's Department to initiate work among women, incorporated a women's column into the CPC newspaper, and spearheaded the formation of a national organization for working-class women, the Women's Labor Leagues (WLL). The party's growing interest in the organization of women signified important progress from the practice of the pre-war socialist movement. While the CPC's ethnic complexion and its emphasis on a class analysis of women's oppression signified continuity with the pre-war socialist movement, Communists also sought to transcend their past, embracing a new social and sexual order which included the emancipation of women.

The CPC's approach to the woman question and the precise outlines of its strategies were conditioned primarily by its response to the advice of the Communist International (CI), a post-revolutionary organization largely controlled by the USSR. Secondly, the social base of the party and its own perceptions, influenced by a Marxist and Leninist analysis, of the needs of working-class women were also influential in moulding ideas and tactics.<sup>6</sup> Communists were affected by the stark realities of the lives of working-class women — the realities of low wages, economic insecurity, and meagre social welfare schemes — and were motivated by the political concerns and understanding of their own membership. In the last resort, the advice of the CI was, of necessity, refracted through the prism of local traditions, needs, and realities.

In the 1920s the CPC remained a fragile and weak force within the Canadian labour movement and political life; nonetheless, its view of women's oppression and agitational work on women's issues marked out new parameters of thought and action for Canadian socialism. That the woman question never became a priority for the CPC was a consequence of factors both internal and external to the party. Despite the Communists' best efforts, and their connection to the "successful" Russian revolution, their vision of a new order remained marginal — even within their own party. Although many noble

<sup>6</sup> The Canadian Communist Party stood in the theoretical tradition of the earlier Socialist Party of Canada (SPC) and the Social Democratic Party of Canada (SDPC), for the Communists' perception of the woman question was shaped largely by Marxist (and Leninist) thought. In Communist publications, Marx's analysis of women's role in industrial capitalism, his elucidation of the antithetical situation of bourgeois and working-class women, and his prediction that the contradictions of women's waged labour held out the prospect of transforming their consciousness, were often emphasized. *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, by Marx's colleague Frederick Engels, also became an essential cornerstone of Communist education on the woman question. Communists read August Bebel's *Woman Under Socialism*, and as they became available, Lenin's observations on the woman question. Communists stressed Lenin's antipathy to "sexual" questions and his emphasis on the absolute necessity of a class-based movement of women, situated within and directed by the vanguard of the revolutionary movement. I have intentionally omitted a longer analysis and critique of Marx, Engels, and Lenin on the woman question because it would take another whole paper to do justice to this topic.

convention resolutions declared the need to organize women, the party itself mirrored the formidable structures of inequality and oppression facing women in wider Canadian society.

# I

DURING THE 1920s, the influence of the CI on the Canadian party in regard to the woman question was especially powerful, not only because the CI was generally the guiding influence on its member parties, but also because at this time the reform of women's status within Russian society appeared to herald major, inspiring advances towards women's emancipation.<sup>7</sup> In Russia, women were not only accorded political equality, but radical changes in Soviet family law augured the possibility of a major transformation of Russian society.<sup>8</sup> Only six weeks after the revolution, registration of civil marriage was instituted, abortions legalized, and a new code of matrimonial law abolished the classification of "illegitimate" children, established women's equality in marriage, and made divorce accessible for both partners. In the early years, even Lenin's predictions about communal domestic work seemed a possibility as communal kitchens became a way of life in Moscow during the civil war.<sup>9</sup>

In 1919, the Soviet Communist Party set up the Zhenotdel, a women's section of the party designed to encourage and organize the activities of revolutionary women. Supported by a network of local zhenotdels, paid party staff, and volunteer organizers, the Zhenotdel attempted educational and agitational work — everything from reading classes to conferences for working women — to draw women into political activity. The obstacles to its work were immense; on top of the economic chaos and poverty of post-revolutionary Russia and the overall male hostility (even within Communist circles) to women's political activism, Zhenotdel workers had to contend with the difficulties of communication in a geographically vast land, and firmly-entrenched cultural barriers to women's emancipation, especially in the peasant villages and in the Muslim east. While some historians argue that many Bolsheviks only supported the Zhenotdel since it was an expedient tool to gather support for the government and consolidate the revolution, they nonetheless conclude that the Zhenotdel

<sup>7</sup> Historians differ on the extent to which, in its early years, the CI was dominated by the Russian Communist Party. Some argue that in the early years, the CI did encompass an important element of democratic debate. See, for example, Gus Horowitz, "Introduction" to Leon Trotsky, *The Third International after Lenin* (New York 1970). A different view is presented by a contemporary member of the CI, Angelica Balabanoff, who maintained that there was little or no debate allowed from the very inception of the CI. Angelica Balabanoff, *My Life as Rebel* (Bloomington 1975). Either way, the Russian party was the leading force in the early 1920s and the dominating force by the late 1920s.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia* (Princeton 1978); Dorothy Atkinson, Alexander Dallin, and Gail W. Lapidus, eds., *Women in Russia* (Stanford 1977).

<sup>9</sup> These communal kitchens were largely abolished after the war.

waged a highly successful agitational and educational campaign for women's equality, "achieving in its work, a major impact on Soviet society, especially in the cities."<sup>10</sup>

Contemporary Bolshevik leaders, however, were sometimes less enthusiastic about the Zhenotdel's efforts; the 1923 party congress warned about the danger of "feminist tendencies" in the organization, and trade unions repudiated the Zhenotdel's recommendations for "affirmative action." Despite its achievements, the party's criticisms of Zhenotdel operations increased throughout the 1920s, and in 1929, when the Central Committee Secretariat of the party was reorganized, the Zhenotdel was effectively eliminated. The demise of the Zhenotdel, of course, was linked to the triumph of Stalinism and the liquidation of any organizations which might threaten the centralized party-state. As well, in more general terms, the women's revolution in the Soviet Union had faltered in confrontation with social reality — the economic chaos of the state, the nature of the new economic policy, and the strength of patriarchal traditions.

Yet, to North American Marxists, who had been concerned primarily with the transformation of the productive process and the establishment of women's legal equality, the Russian example during the 1920s appeared a beacon of hope. American socialist and liberal journalists like Jessica Smith, Anna Louise Strong, and Louise Bryant, who visited Russia and wrote enthusiastically of the revolution in women's roles, gave further emphasis to these hopes.<sup>11</sup> In Canada, reports on Soviet women were treated with interest and sympathy by a broad spectrum of the left, not just by the Communist Party.

To the Communist Party of Canada, the Russian example gave new encouragement simply to expanded deliberation on the woman question. From international journals like *The Communist International* and *Imprecorr*, Canadian Communist leaders gleaned information on Zhenotdel activities and followed discussions of the Bolsheviks on the woman question. Conference reports, theses, resolutions, and directives on the mobilization of women abounded in these publications. The establishment of the Zhenotdel and the Women's Secretariat, coupled with the latter's constant advice to emulate these organizations, encouraged the attempt to establish similar networks in Canada and gave credibility to the special education and separate organization of women. Lastly, Soviet reforms in marriage, divorce, and abortion laws fostered similar debate in Canada, opening up women's issues which had rarely been discussed by the pre-war left and sparking investigation of women's oppression which was almost unparalleled in the subsequent history of the party.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia*, 344. See also Gregory Massell, *The Surrogate Proletariat: Moslem Women and Revolutionary Strategies in Soviet Central Asia, 1919-1929* (Princeton 1974).

<sup>11</sup> Louise Bryant, *Six Red Months in Russia* (1918; London 1982); Jessica Smith, *Women in Soviet Russia* (New York 1928); Anna Louise Strong, *I Change Worlds* (New York 1937).

Throughout the 1920s recommendations for agitational and organization work among Canadian women were made by the International Women's Secretariat; while some of these suggestions outlined new areas and methods of work, the general priorities of Communist work — i.e., the mobilization of wage-earning women and the establishment of support groups for working-class wives — represented traditions already part of the Canadian left. Pressed by the secretariat, however, organizational effort and agitational campaigns directed towards women were initiated with new vigour by the CPC. For example, after the party decided to work openly and legally in 1922, a Women's Department was set up to spearhead the drive to organize working-class women and draw them into the revolutionary movement. The department's first director, Florence Custance, remains a vaguely-defined figure in Communist history, in part owing to her early death in 1929. Born in England and trained as a school teacher, Custance emigrated to Canada with her husband, a carpenter, and she became involved in the labour movement as a leader of the Amalgamated Carpenters of Canada Wives' Auxiliary. Custance's involvement in the socialist movement can be dated from her pre-war membership in the Socialist Party of North America and her post-war leadership in the Toronto Plebs League and Ontario Labour College.<sup>12</sup> Subsequent to her attendance at the Guelph convention which established the first Communist Party, she sat on the Central Committee of the party, and later headed the Canadian Friends of Soviet Russia.

A somewhat reserved intellectual, rather than an "agitational" leader, Custance has been described as one of the "original driving forces"<sup>13</sup> of the early Communist movement in Canada. She also became the driving force behind the organization of the Communist women's movement. In May 1922, shortly before Custance left for the fourth Comintern congress, the party's Women's Department inaugurated its work with a public meeting, attended by about 200. Despite this successful meeting, *The Worker* only sporadically carried news of the Women's Bureau and women's struggles until three years later, when a regular women's column, coordinated by Custance, and entitled, "The Working Women's Section," began to give more frequent coverage to the woman question. This column became one of the party's primary means of presenting its view of the woman question and of advertising its work among women. The activity of the Women's Department was given further focus by the creation of a Federation of Women's Labor Leagues (WLL), following the repeated advice of the International to set up a working-class women's organization guided by the party to draw women into the revolutionary movement.

In Canada, the Communist Women's Labor Leagues followed in the footsteps of pre-war SDPC "sewing circles" of Finnish socialist women, and in the

<sup>12</sup> Ian Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks: The Early Years of the Communist Party in Canada* (Montreal 1981), 65-6.

<sup>13</sup> William Rodney, *Soldiers of the International: A History of the Communist Party of Canada, 1919-1929* (Toronto 1968), 165.

tradition of the Women's Labor Leagues, which were modelled on the British WLLs, auxiliaries of the British Independent Labour Party (ILP). By World War I, WLLs existed in Winnipeg, Toronto, and Port Arthur; after a period of inactivity during the post-war depression, the leagues were rejuvenated around 1922, largely due to the efforts of Custance and the CPC. In Toronto, the inaugural meeting of the revitalized league was held in 1923, and the next year a federal WLL apparatus was established at a conference in London, following that year's Trades and Labour Congress convention. The federated leagues, maintained Custance, who was elected national secretary at that conference, would enjoy some local autonomy, although they would also be guided by the general aims of the federation. Much to its chagrin, the federation was denied formal affiliation to the TLC, supposedly because its members, as housewives, were not "producers." Custance drew strong support from WLL delegates with her critical response to this charge:

WLL members . . . are women who cook, sew, wash, scrub, and who perform duties necessary to the whole process of production. One day those objectors, who in mentality, belong to the Middle Ages, will wake up and find themselves living in an age of social production.<sup>14</sup>

The true reason for some TLC members' hostility to the leagues may have been the presence of Communists like Custance on the WLL executive.<sup>15</sup> The TLC's rejection of the WLLs must have been a disappointing setback for Custance, for the affiliation scheme was part of the party's larger "united front" attempts to work within, and influence the labour movement. Following this united front strategy, the WLLs also tried to join local Trades and Labour Councils. In 1924, the Toronto WLL successfully affiliated to the Toronto and District Labour Council, and over the next three years it earned some praise for its efforts from trade union men. But in 1927 this amiable relationship ended and the WLL was expelled from the council. Ironically, the expulsion campaign was led by socialist Jimmy Simpson, who in 1924 had heartily supported the WLL's affiliation to the council.<sup>16</sup>

The WLLs, like the larger CPC, also tried to play a role in the Canadian

<sup>14</sup> Report of the Conference of Women's Labor Leagues, September 17-18, 1924, London, Ontario. The discussion was also reported in the *London Free Press*, 18 September 1924.

<sup>15</sup> At the 1923 meeting of the TLC, delegate James Marsh objected to the WLL affiliation to the congress because, he claimed, the "League was a political body and a wing of the Workers Party." Trades and Labour Congress of Canada, *Report of the Proceedings of the 33rd Convention*, Vancouver, September 10-14, 1923.

<sup>16</sup> Although the WLLs were technically expelled because of a constitutional amendment, anti-communism was the most important reason behind the expulsion. See *The Woman Worker*, December 1927; *The Toronto Star*, 4 November 1927. Unfortunately, the Toronto and District Labour Council minutes for 1927 are missing, but earlier minutes show Simpson's support of the WLLs' aims and works. Public Archives of Canada, MG 28 I 44, M-2292, Labour Council of Metropolitan Toronto Collection, Toronto and District Labour Council Minutes, 2 Oct., 20 Nov., 1924.

Labor Party (CLP). In the early 1920s, labourites were visible in some local WLLs and may have contributed to the federation's monthly paper, *The Woman Worker*, established in 1926 and edited by Custance.<sup>17</sup> At the Ontario Labor Party conventions of 1925 and 1926, WLLs were successful in securing passages of some of their resolutions, probably striking easy alliances on issues like "no cadet training" which other socialists supported. Only in 1927, however, were the leagues able to announce that most of their programme had become CLP policy; but this was a shallow victory, for that year most socialists deserted the CLP, leaving the Communists to occupy its shell.

Not all socialists and labourites responded with complete hostility to the WLLs. In the West, the WLLs were able to participate in the Western Women's Social and Economic Conferences, organized by labourite Beatrice Bridgen. *The Worker* reported that the first conference in 1924 was "pleasing but not much of a progressive character was accomplished as the ideas of many delegates were dominated by bourgeois respectability and fear of action."<sup>18</sup> In the next few years, the WLLs were able successfully to sponsor motions from their own programme such as the moderate demands for better minimum wage laws and mothers' allowances. But in the late 1920s Communist women became increasingly critical of the conference's reformist viewpoint and its concentration on the care of the "feeble-minded." Unable to mould a majority which was Marxist and Communist in outlook, the WLLs eventually withdrew from active participation in the conferences.

Thus, despite early alliances with other socialists and labourites, by 1927 the WLL had become predominantly Communist in composition and character. Although the federation could be called a Communist "front" organization, it did not include only party members, but contained women sympathetic to the party and willing to accept guidance from the Women's Department on questions of policy and tactics. As the number of leagues grew to 37 at the end of 1927, they also came to reflect the ethnic strengths of the Communist Party, with Finnish, Ukrainian, and Jewish leagues outnumbering the English-speaking ones.

## II

THE PREAMBLE OF THE WLL constitution adopted in 1924 reiterated the theoretical and practical aims of the party already outlined in Custance's articles in *The Worker*. Indicating her debt to Marxist and Leninist writing, Custance analyzed the changing role of women in capitalist society, pointing out

<sup>17</sup> In Hamilton, for instance, well-known ILP activists Mrs. J. Ingles and Janet Inman were on the WLL executive in 1924-5, and in Regina, Mrs. Mabel Hanway, also a labourite, was a visible WLL leader for a time. Rose Henderson, a leader of the Canadian Labour Party, wrote an article in 1927 commending and supporting the *Woman Worker* and the work of the WLLs. *Hamilton Spectator*, 7 February 1925 and 23 May 1925; *Woman Worker*, July 1926; *Woman Worker*, January 1927.

<sup>18</sup> *The Worker*, 19 April 1924.



that the home, once the centre of production, had been transformed by machines, thereby forcing women out of economic necessity into the area of factory production. Capitalism, emphasized the WLL constitution, had either reduced home labour to "household drudgery or converted it to wage-labour," thereby creating three groups of women — household workers, wage labourers, and part-time workers — all of whom contributed essential labour to the maintenance of capitalism.<sup>19</sup> Because women were in industry to stay, said Custance, revolutionaries must fight for women's right to organize and for equal pay, as well as for the protection of mothers and children. Moreover, "working-class women must fight for their rights with the men of their own class," on the one hand refusing to be used as wage reducers, and on the other, remaining unswayed by equal rights issues as presented by the suffrage movement:

Sex is at this time a minor question compared to the class struggle . . . we must take up the struggle against capitalist tyranny which keeps our husbands chained to uncertainty and us to worry and desperation and our children to want.<sup>20</sup>

Throughout the 1920s these basic tenets — the economic exploitation of women and the imperative of the revolutionary solidarity of both sexes — were stressed. Pre-war socialist publications like *Cotton's Weekly* at times had taken a similar line, but the Communist approach was distinguished by a new emphasis on the importance of the woman question, and a new measure of sympathy for women's particular exploitation and oppression within capitalism. *Worker* articles, for instance, emphasized the necessity of bringing the "most oppressed" group — women — into revolutionary politics to help them "work out their own emancipation."<sup>21</sup> *The Woman Worker*, unabashedly political, proclaimed its intention to forgo all the traditional "fashions, recipes and sickly love stories" of women's papers. It kept its promise and concentrated instead on women's struggle for "equal duties and rights with men"<sup>22</sup> and women's "fight against customs, traditions and superstitions which kept them chained to passive roles and conservatism."<sup>23</sup> In part, the Communist analysis betrayed the oft-repeated belief that women were, by nature, more conservative and fearful of social change than were men. Still, it also signified some sympathy for woman's sexual oppression and an implicit understanding that her exploitation and subordination within capitalism was unique and more complex than man's was. This sympathy was given further emphasis in the issues discussed by the WLLs and by the party's methods of organizing, particularly in its construction of semi-autonomous structures where working-class women

<sup>19</sup> Public Archives of Canada (PAC), Finnish Organization of Canada Collection (FOC), MG 28 V 46, Vol. 141, "Program and Constitution of the Canadian Federation of Women's Labor Leagues."

<sup>20</sup> *The Worker*, 1 May 1922.

<sup>21</sup> *The Worker*, 13 June 1925.

<sup>22</sup> *The Woman Worker*, July 1926.

<sup>23</sup> *The Worker*, 13 June 1925.

could organize to discuss a programme of women's demands and work towards women's emancipation.

The party's approach to the creation of a women's Communist movement followed two general paths: on the one hand, the education, organization, and unionization of wage-earning women was pursued, and on the other, the formation of political discussion and support groups for working-class wives was attempted. These two approaches were not perceived as being mutually exclusive; in fact, they were supposed to be connected through the WLLs. In practice, however, there was some difference between the organization of women at the point of production and women in the home. Young and/or single women cadres with their greater freedom to travel were more likely to be active as organizers for the Young Communist League (YCL) or as industrial organizers and agitators, while married "party wives," tied closely to home and family, concentrated on fund-raising and support work associated with the WLLs. The WLLs, explained one woman, included women from the local Finnish community like her mother, who left the "other" party politics to the men while she "mainly did fund-raising and social affairs," although with an "important attempt at political education too." "The WLLs were for the housewives, not the women in the factories" was the common perception.<sup>24</sup> This attitude revealed some of the barriers to political participation encountered by women with families. In keeping with predominant social norms, many homemakers might be charged, especially in the absence of their revolutionary husbands, with the difficult task of feeding and clothing the family but not with the equally difficult task of political organizing.<sup>25</sup> In Britain, one historian argues, a very sharp separation existed between the cadres and party wives, with the latter held in some contempt by the former.<sup>26</sup> In contrast, the Canadian WLLs sometimes drew both groups together, and their relations were not governed by hostility. Nonetheless, subtle differences *did* exist, and this differentiation was probably made more explicit after 1929 when the nature of party life made it increasingly difficult for married, non-wage-earning women to participate on the same grounds as single, younger activists.<sup>27</sup>

According to the CI, the mobilization of women in the factories was to have

<sup>24</sup> Taime Davies and Lil Himmelfarb Ilyomaki, interview with author and Karen Teeple, 30 January 1983.

<sup>25</sup> PAC, MG 31 B11, J.E. Rae Papers, "Q. How did he [Jacob Penner] finance his family? A. Well he wasn't, that was the point. He was not financing his family. My mother was struggling with that part of it and she just couldn't make ends meet." (Thanks to Janice Newton for giving me this reference.)

<sup>26</sup> Sue Bruley, "Women in the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1921-39," Ph.D. thesis, University of London, 1980.

<sup>27</sup> For example, younger YCL activists like Lil Himmelfarb and Dora Liebovitch, and single female leaders like Becky Buhay and Jeanne Corbin were the party members arrested during the free speech fights in Toronto after 1929. During the Third Period, and particularly when the party was considered illegal, it was difficult for women with families to take on the same tasks as the other female cadres.

priority, and in order to facilitate the organization of women at the point of production, the Women's Bureau, on the suggestion of the International Women's Secretariat, studied the economic, juridical, and social position of working women. The bureau's findings, which were published in the founding WLL leaflet and in later newspaper articles, revealed the desperate situation of many working women. The vast majority of female wage-earners laboured in unskilled jobs, often domestic work; only about 1 per cent were unionized, and many worked without even the protection of the minimum wage laws.<sup>28</sup> Sub-standard wage rates, along with long hours and arduous working conditions, were convincing indications of the necessity to organize working women: a Comintern directive was likely not needed to encourage the revolutionaries' disgust with the lot of women workers.

Desperate working conditions, however, do not necessarily make unionization an easy prospect. The Women's bureau saw four major obstacles to the unionization of women workers: the influence of religious, social, and pacifist organizations like the YWCA which "pose as protectors of the working girl;" the organized welfare programmes of factories; to a certain extent, the minimum wage; and lastly, the fact that "women do not take wage-earning seriously, but see it as a temporary necessity" before marriage.<sup>29</sup> Whatever the presumed consciousness of working women, the structural realities of their work lives did militate against their organization: they worked in unskilled jobs, often alone or in small groups isolated geographically from one another. Moreover, in the 1920s the expanding white-collar sector had few union traditions upon which to draw. Unfortunately, women could draw little aid from the established trade union movement, for the conservative TLC, weakened by the 1921-2 depression, membership losses, and employer overtures and offensives, had little or no time for the concerns of working women.<sup>30</sup>

But the party's trade union strategies also tended to exclude women. In the early 1920s the Red International of Labour Unions (RILU), a Comintern organization, had laid out the best tactics for trade union endeavours, urging members to work within established trade unions, to build a communist and revolutionary current as a counter to the conservative trade union leadership of the AFL/TLC. The low number of unionized women and their marginal status in the union movement, however, meant that they were easily bypassed by Communist strategies which concentrated instead on recognized areas of radical support, usually in heavy industry and in mining and lumbering. Other suggestions for organizing wage-earning women were similarly inappropriate:

<sup>28</sup> Report of the Conference of Women's Labor Leagues, September 17-18, 1924, London, Ontario.

<sup>29</sup> University of Toronto Rare Book Room (U of T). Kenny Collection, Box 2, "Our Tasks Among Women," Central Executive Committee Report, Fifth Convention, 1925, 64.

<sup>30</sup> V. Strong-Boag, "The Girl of the New Day: Canadian Working Women in the 1920s," *Labour/Le Travailleur* 4 (1979); Ian Radforth, "Ontario Labour in the 1920s," unpublished paper, York University, 1978.

the CI's repeated advice to initiate "mass delegate meetings from the factory nuclei" of activist and Communist women belied the Canadian reality of an extremely weak, or even non-existent, radical presence in most women's workplaces.<sup>31</sup> Finally, organizing new locals of unions was a time-consuming and expensive enterprise which the small, poorly-funded Women's Bureau was ill-equipped to pursue on its own. Ultimately, if the wage-earning woman failed to take herself seriously, so too did the CPC. In its self-criticism, the party admitted that its efforts with working women were lacking: "the material at the disposal of the Party to carry on this work," reported Custance in 1927, "has been up to the present limited and weak. Therefore, much that could have been done has been left undone."<sup>32</sup>

Despite the low priority placed on the unionization of women, the Women's Bureau did manage to accomplish some of its other aims: it gave substantial attention to the plight of working women in its own press; it waged a visible campaign against the inadequacies of the minimum wage laws; and in a few areas, WLLs were able to set up informal social and support networks for working women. The "Working Women's Section," and later the *Woman Worker*, abounded with personal and second-hand descriptions of the day-to-day existence of working girls and women, and their tales of low wages and exhaustion were often followed by analyses of women's waged labour under capitalism, written by Custance or by Becky Buhay, a dedicated young organizer rising quickly in the party leadership. The problems of working women were also discussed in the CPC's language press, *Kampf*, *Vaupaus*, and *Robitnysa*. In 1925, for example, *The Worker* reprinted a letter from *Kampf*'s Women's Section, in which a Jewish garment worker described the speedup and unhealthy conditions in her Montreal factory. In reply, Buhay pointed out that such horrific working conditions could be effectively combatted with a union and that the false consciousness of her fellow French-Canadian workers in the factory should be faced squarely with honest denunciations of their frivolous ways.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, sometimes advice given in the Working Women's Section lectured working-class women on their easy acceptance of bourgeois, trivial distractions, telling them, for instance, to eschew "charm and personality" courses at the YWCA and "thoughts of catching Prince Charming" and instead, educate themselves as to why they worked such long hours and faced uncertain, seasonal employment.<sup>34</sup> Communist leaders clearly saw the consciousness of working woman as problematic to organizing attempts. Nonetheless, the letters of working girls were not always greeted with such paternalism. Often, they were printed simply as written or the editor gave encouraging and simple advice: keep on fighting for your rights, organize a union, and come and find support in the revolutionary movement.

<sup>31</sup> *Imprecorr* 4, 71 (6 October 1924); 6, 69 (26 October 1926).

<sup>32</sup> U of T, Kenny Collection, "Our Tasks Among Women," 63.

<sup>33</sup> *The Worker*, 12 September 1925.

<sup>34</sup> *The Worker*, 15 November 1925.

A major part of the Women's Bureau agitational work in the 1920s centred on its campaign to expose the violations and inadequacies of the minimum wage laws, thus "showing the ineffectiveness of government protection as compared with that of unions."<sup>35</sup> Custance and the Toronto WLL took up a number of cases of minimum wage abuse, attempting to attract the attention of the daily press to their cause. In fall 1924, for instance, they collected evidence that the Willard Chocolate Company, which had prosecuted girls for stealing 50¢ worth of candy, was falsifying its time cards, and that the Minimum Wage Board had only taken steps when the workers secured a lawyer. Even then the board urged no publicity — for the sake of the company! This chocolate company case was taken up by the Young Communist League and eventually made its way into the daily press. Despite Communist and labour council pressure, however, public hearings did not produce a conclusive conviction of the company.

The Minimum Wage Board, the CPC tried to show, was essentially afraid of manufacturers, and the government was not a neutral body acting to protect women's interests. The Women's Labor Leagues produced evidence at annual board hearings to show that the suggested "minimum" wage could barely support a working woman, and that it often became the "maximum" wage for women. The minimum wage campaign continued into the late 1920s with newly organized WLLs taking it up in cities across the country. In Regina, an Employed Girls Council was initiated by the WLL, and together, they pursued the campaign against the ineffectiveness of this law, having some limited success in pressuring the government to close the more blatant loopholes. The campaign was also highly visible in Vancouver, Montreal, and Winnipeg. Florence Custance played a pivotal role in the Ontario effort, making alliances early in the campaign with local labour councils and the Canadian Labour Party. Her efforts, in fact, earned her praise from the labourite paper, *The People's Cause*, which commended Custance for her persistence in pursuing cases of minimum wage abuse.<sup>36</sup>

In the later 1920s a few WLLs were also able to spark the creation of organizations for young working women; these were primarily social and support groups, rather than political and economic lobbies. In Montreal, Vancouver, and northern Ontario, Finnish WLLs aided the establishment of associations for Finnish domestics. Such organizations, however, did not achieve the status of recognized collective bargaining agents, and in the main, WLL tactics remained centred on the minimum wage struggle. In 1927, Custance assessed the work of the Women's Bureau on the minimum wage and other campaigns for working women, lamenting that while some success had been made in "breaking through the master class influence," in general, working women remained outside the influence of the Communist Party.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> U of T, Kenny Collection, "Our Tasks Among Women," 64.

<sup>36</sup> *The People's Cause*, 26 April 1925.

<sup>37</sup> U of T, Kenny Collection, "Our Tasks Among Women," 64.

## III

THE SECOND ASPECT OF CPC strategy was to draw working-class housewives into support groups which would act as auxiliary forces to men's struggles and concurrently would develop women's revolutionary consciousness by the discussion of political issues, particularly those of concern to mothers and housewives. Communists strongly believed that working-class women had the ability to affect the political action of their husbands and families and that their influence was often a conservative or apathetic one. They saw women, isolated amidst domestic drudgery, as easy prey for the illusory and conservative myths of capitalist society. "Women," wrote Custance in a Women's Department report, "are almost entirely under capitalist class influence, through the church, the newspapers, the media."<sup>38</sup> Working-class women, said a WLL document, "determine the fate of a strike, make or mar men's morale."<sup>39</sup> It was therefore essential, it concluded, that "wives of trade unionists in particular be brought into trade union activity, in fact should be unionized also and thus be made sympathetic and active supporters of their husbands in struggle."<sup>40</sup>

Although this view assumed women's mobilization to be secondary to the "important" radicalization of male trade unionists, it did recognize the essential role that women played in labour struggles, as managers of the family budget, as "tension-managers" in the working-class household, and even on the picket line. Yet, the view of working-class women which predominated in the CPC was one which placed women at polar ends of the political spectrum: women were supposedly suspicious of social change and socialism, but when their revolutionary consciousness was raised they became militant fighters — sometimes more militant than the men. "Will women speed the liberation of society or be the bulwark of reaction?" was the classic question asked of women by the Communist press.<sup>41</sup> This view attributed little complexity to women's political understanding. As Dorothy Smith notes, "working-class women are portrayed either as 'backward' or as salt of the earth heroic figures; both are polar positions along a single dimension."<sup>42</sup> This linear view of women's consciousness, with the advanced women at one end of the political spectrum and the backward women at the other, may have grown, in part, from women's home-centred lives and their isolation from, and disinterest in, politics. Perhaps too, their cynicism was misinterpreted as conservatism. But this idea may also have emerged from a generalized male prejudice which saw women as "backward," and hence politically backward as well.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> PAC, FOC Collection. "Program and Constitution of the Canadian Federation of Women's Labor Leagues."

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *The Worker*, 1 May 1922.

<sup>42</sup> Dorothy Smith, *Feminism and Marxism* (Vancouver 1974), 34.

Despite their inclination to conservatism, working-class women, it was believed, could be radicalized. Housewives were reminded of the limited material conditions of their lives, the drudgery of endless domestic labour, the meagre wages of their husbands, and the limited opportunities facing their children. In a short story published in *The Worker*, two working-class housewives talk over the fence about the effects of war and unemployment on their homes. The narrators' husband, a veteran, is unemployed, but "the British Vampire," his wife explains, "took his best and left him no will to fight."<sup>43</sup> Although oppressed by worry and by their poor living conditions, she is urged to carry on her fight for survival and consider the reasons for her plight. The story's message was clear: the role of a housewife was to bind her husband and family together despite and against an unjust, exploitative world. Communist writings often assumed that women, although in one sense ignorant about politics, still "understand in a personal way issues like unemployment."<sup>44</sup> Thus, the task of the party was to make the personal political for women.

To this end, women were frequently appealed to on consumer and peace issues. The Communist press reflected the prevailing notion that men were the "breadwinners" in working-class households; yet, because women sometimes played an important role in supervising the family budget, the issue of high prices was used by the press as a radicalizing tool.<sup>45</sup> Similarly, articles on peace, which perpetually had a high profile in the *Woman Worker*, tried to personalize international political issues by appealing to women on the basis of their maternal instinct for preserving life. The peace appeal did attempt to expose war as a consequence of capitalist economies and imperialist expansion, but the maternal theme always remained important to the discussion. Not only will you lose your sons, these articles pointed out, but you will lose them in a useless war which will bring to you hunger and to capitalists, greater profits. While the *Woman Worker* urged its readers to reject the liberal humanitarian pacifism represented by organizations like the United Nations Organization or the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WIL), it shared the WIL's emphasis on maternalism, though shaping it in a class-conscious mould.<sup>46</sup> Associated with the anti-war cause was the campaign

<sup>43</sup> *The Worker*, 1 May 1922.

<sup>44</sup> *The Worker*, 7 November 1925.

<sup>45</sup> This ideal of a family wage — that is, the idea of a male breadwinner, who would provide for all the family — was also the dominant view in the pre-war Canadian socialist movement. See Linda Kealey, "Canadian Socialism and the Woman Question," 78. There is some question whether this "ideal" was a reality for many working-class households, but whatever the reality, as Linda Kealey argues, "the ideal operated . . . to support existing inequalities in . . . socialist organizations. . . . It defined the contribution women could make to socialist organizations." For a longer analysis of the family wage see Michèle Barrett and Mary McIntosh, "The Family Wage: Some Problems for Socialists and Feminists," *Capital and Class* 11 (1980), 51-72.

<sup>46</sup> For a discussion of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom's brand of "maternal" pacifism, see Thomas Socknat, "Pacifism in the Early CCF" and

to remove military training from the schools, thereby eliminating the capitalist and militarist indoctrination of working-class youth. In keeping with united front tactics, the WLLs tried to link forces with other reformers on this issue: they campaigned successfully to include this demand in the Canadian Labour Party platform, and Custance tried to run for the Toronto School Board, including "no cadet training" in her platform.<sup>47</sup>

As well as appealing to working-class women on issues of bread and peace, the party attempted to encourage women's active support for the labour struggles of their husbands and brothers. Women often played a militant and crucial role in strike situations but it was sometimes difficult to sustain their involvement in ongoing political organizations. *The Worker* and *Woman Worker* used their columns both to publicize examples of wives' militance and to encourage their further political action. During a cross-country tour for the *Worker*, Becky Buhay found herself in the midst of a coal miners' strike in Alberta. She helped the wives organize into a support group and led them on a march and demonstration to Edmonton to publicize the just demands of the strikers. After a violent clash with the police, many of the women pickets were jailed, and some were later sentenced on charges of rioting. The *Worker* followed their cases, which Buhay used as evidence to show that women, when aroused, could be excellent revolutionary and working-class fighters:

The persecution and brutality of the police was answered by the women... some of them stormed the police station and broke the windows. Their defiant attitude was the greatest surprise to the authorities who had expected tears, supplications and general weakness, but they discovered before long that women were made of sterner stuff. Women showed Edmonton that if their men were taken from them, they would fight on.<sup>48</sup>

In other labour struggles, women's militance and potential power was stressed in the Communist press; in Hamilton, the fortitude of a housewife was described who, when leading an unemployment parade with a red banner, was beaten by police; in Nova Scotia, the militance of the coal miners' wives during the 1922 strike was chronicled; and in northern Ontario, the role of Ukrainian women in the struggle to unionize gold miners was lauded.

Although economic issues, especially the family wage and the workplace, were central to the Communist Party's approach to women, neither the *Worker* nor the *Woman Worker* ignored issues which touched more directly on woman's personal subordination in the family and her lack of control over her own reproductive life. Discussion of women's role in the family was not always consistent, for women's family roles were, at different times, both exalted and criticized. Some articles in *The Worker*, for example, commended working-

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Joan Sangster, "Women of the 'New Era': Women in the Early CCF," in W. Brennan, ed., *Building the Cooperative Commonwealth* (forthcoming, 1985).

<sup>47</sup> Custance was prevented from running because she could not fulfill the necessary property qualifications.

<sup>48</sup> *The Worker*, 1 February 1923.



class women for their selfless labour in the home and their devotion to motherhood. Yet, other commentary was critical of a society which tied women to the "trammels of household drudgery"<sup>49</sup> and argued that to be truly free, women must be relieved of the degrading labour of "providing services to others, living by the sufferance of one's husband."<sup>50</sup> In fact, as late as 1925, after most Russian communal kitchens had been closed, it was suggested that communal household aid was as essential a prerequisite to women's emancipation as her participation in production. Articles in *The Worker* occasionally decried the injustice of the "double burden" held by working married women, and chastised family men for their "bourgeois sexist" attitudes.<sup>51</sup> Thus, in their discussion of women's role in the family, Communists wrestled with old traditions and revolutionary ideas; although homage was sometimes paid to the virtues of women's domestic labour and maternal sacrifices, Communists also sought to apply new lessons, especially from Lenin, about the isolation and oppression of women within the domestic sphere. "Complete freedom is impossible as long as men are the privileged sex," explained one such article discussing "Leninism and the Working Woman;" women must break through the bonds of their own timidity and through self-assertion help to achieve their own emancipation.<sup>52</sup>

Within the party and in the Communist press, there was also some discussion of divorce, birth control, and abortion: this debate reflected the influence of recent reforms in the Soviet Union and secondly, the interests of Canadian Communist women. A demand for mothers' clinics (a euphemism for birth control information)<sup>53</sup> was included in the WLL platform, and in 1925, the party responded, with cautious interest, to the establishment of an Ontario Birth Control League. Addressing the league's formation, *The Worker* set out the party view, placing the need for birth control within a class analysis, and carefully rejecting any eugenicist ideas often associated with the birth control movement. The CPC was influenced, in part, by a long-standing socialist antipathy to neo-Malthusianism, and secondly, by the example of the Soviet Union, which had legalized abortion and provided birth control clinics in the name of economic and physiological relief for working-class housewives. In keeping with this influence, the CPC always stressed the economic and medical imperatives for birth control rather than arguing that such information was a basic right of any woman; this latter perspective, however, may have been the private view of some party women.

Although Communist arguments were not based on all women's right to reproductive freedom, the party's public support for birth control was still a crack in the wall of silence existing in Canadian society. Unlike the United

<sup>49</sup> *The Woman Worker*, September 1927.

<sup>50</sup> *The Worker*, 7 November 1925.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *The Worker*, 21 March 1925.

<sup>53</sup> Mothers' clinics were also to give pre-natal and maternity care.

States and Britain, before the 1920s, Canada had not produced a birth control movement, although the pre-war left had occasionally spoken in favour of birth control information, usually addressing the issue of family limitation within the context of the larger question of how a smaller population would affect labour's struggle against capitalism. After the war, the issue was taken up by some writers in the *One Big Union Bulletin*, but in general, even during the "emancipated" 1920s, the discussion of birth control was unusual.<sup>54</sup>

Although the public dissemination of birth control information was illegal, women were eager to obtain such information, and abortion was often attempted as the only known means of limiting fertility.<sup>55</sup> Thus, pressure from the rank and file may have been one impetus to the party's discussion of the subject and its limited support for the Birth Control League. Indeed, immediately after the articles on the league, the *Worker* printed a long letter written by an Alberta comrade who insisted that birth control was both "essential information for working-class women in the here and now . . . and an indispensable psychological aid to all marriages," and he concluded by urging the Working Women's Section to devote more space to the subject.<sup>56</sup> In the columns of *The Woman Worker*, the birth control issue was hotly debated, and Custance later commented that the issue was a major drawing card for women's interest in the WLLs — a clear indication of their keen desire for birth control information.

Letters to the *Woman Worker* indicated the wide parameters which the debate assumed. In the paper's opening issue, an article on birth control quoted an address before the B.C. WLL by Dr. Withrow, supporting his philosophy "that every woman should have the right to decide when to have children."<sup>57</sup> The responses of some readers and WLL members, nevertheless, revealed a debt to eugenicist ideas still in vogue. Mrs. Burt, a member of the Toronto WLL, challenged religious objections to birth control, arguing for a "scientific" view of the issue, but simultaneously maintaining that "we can no longer breed numerically without thinking about intelligence and quality of offspring."<sup>58</sup> In a similar vein, another letter warned that forcing women into early marriages and childbearing might "breed race degeneracy;" the writer drew proof for her contention from the "fact" that the "priest-ridden Polish, Slavs and Italians had weak and sickly children."<sup>59</sup> Appropriately, the author noted her debt to Marie Stopes.

<sup>54</sup> Angus McLaren, "What Has This To Do With Working-Class Women?: Birth Control and the Canadian Left, 1900-1939," *Social History/Histoire Sociale* XIV (1981), 439. McLaren also discusses the CPC's views of birth control. His conclusions, I think, are too harsh on the CPC, and they are marred by the fact that he makes no reference to the debates on birth control in the *Woman Worker*.

<sup>55</sup> Angus McLaren, "Birth Control and Abortion in Canada, 1870-1920," *Canadian Historical Review* 59 (1978), 319-40.

<sup>56</sup> *The Worker*, 20 June 1925.

<sup>57</sup> *The Woman Worker*, 26 July 1926.

<sup>58</sup> *The Woman Worker*, September 1927.

<sup>59</sup> *The Woman Worker*, December 1927.

Although these views were printed in the *Woman Worker*, party editorials advocated the total rejection of neo-Malthusian and eugenicist arguments.<sup>60</sup> Poverty, Custance reminded her readers, was not due to the size of the population but to the distribution of wealth, and she warned that the birth control movement was too easily accepting of such neo-Malthusian theories to justify its existence. For this reason, the CPC was always slightly equivocal about its support of birth control. Similarly, the party rejected the libertarian, anarchist perspective personified by Emma Goldman: in 1927, her Canadian speeches on birth control were totally ignored by the Communist press. Rather, the CPC's arguments always remained grounded in a class perspective and a materialist analysis which stressed the right of working-class families to make their own decisions about family size, and the need for relief from the economic and physiological burdens of constant childbearing for working-class women. Statistics showing a high incidence of maternal and infant mortality, for example, were often used to buttress the case for birth control.

In terms of political action, the birth control issue was taken up by some WLLs which pressed local governments for the establishment of mothers' clinics. As with the peace issue, they lobbied the CLP to adopt resolutions demanding such clinics. While the leagues did have some success in making mothers' clinics a part of CLP policy, they were less successful in bringing them to wider public attention and totally unsuccessful in gaining any government sympathy. The issue, tersely commented one *Woman Worker* correspondent, "is not supported by the Establishment."<sup>61</sup> Moreover, while birth control was a consistent component of the WLL platform, it was never considered a primary issue for the CPC as a whole. After the establishment of the *Woman Worker*, most discussion of birth control took place in its columns rather than in *The Worker*. This reflected, in part, a justifiable appeal to women on the basis of a women's issues, but it also meant that there was little wider party discussion and recognition of the seriousness of the issue, a fact which mirrored the secondary nature of the woman question in the party.

Correspondingly, the issue of abortion was dealt with by the party in a secondary, quiet manner. Like the birth control question, abortion was analyzed by the CPC from a materialist perspective which stressed the immediate needs and social reality of working-class women. Readers were sometimes reminded of the relaxed abortion laws in the Soviet Union, and similar liberalization was recommended for Canada. But abortion was also described as an unpleasant and unfortunate practice, resorted to only in capitalist societies or a communist society in transition. The author of a rare article on abortion in the *Worker* maintained that "we are for less and less abortion . . . they could be

<sup>60</sup> The Communist press sometimes referred to "Malthusian" arguments against birth control. I think, technically, they meant neo-Malthusian arguments; that is, the idea that contraception *should* be used as a method of controlling population and poverty.

<sup>61</sup> *The Woman Worker*, April 1928.

reduced to a minimum with birth control information made available."<sup>62</sup> Still, the writer argued, the laws should be changed, for they were routinely disobeyed by doctors and women, to the greater danger of women's health and life. These arguments were similar to those used in the Soviet edict liberalizing abortion laws, in which justification was based on the harsh realities of women's impoverished lives and on the danger to life posed by illegal abortionists.<sup>63</sup> Although completely different in content from later feminist arguments stressing women's rights to choose, the CPC's occasional calls for liberalization were unusual, and progressive at a time when church, state, and the medical profession all strongly opposed any discussion of abortion, let alone easing the abortion laws. This opposition may well have been one reason why the June 1927 article on abortion was the last one of its kind for many years.

Articles in the Communist press dealing with abortion, birth control, and women's role in the family often drew comparisons between the lot of Canadian and Russian women. While the Communist press primarily pointed to women's new political status and economic independence in the USSR, attention also was given to women's new sexual independence and the emergence of an egalitarian family life.<sup>64</sup> Marriage laws "no longer made only to benefit men," and the accessibility of divorce, were transforming relations between the sexes and destroying the patriarchal family, the press claimed, thereby giving "women who were housewives new self-respect."<sup>65</sup> With the disappearance of sexual inequalities, the double standard, and economic dependence, Russian women were said to "feel like they are real human beings, equal to male workers."<sup>66</sup> Reports of Soviet life were especially vocal about the new social character of Russian motherhood; with the availability of birth control, aid to pregnant and nursing mothers, and modern creches, we have abolished women's subordination, declared one optimistic author!<sup>67</sup>

It is difficult to assess how thoroughly these overly optimistic and romantic views of Soviet women and the family were assimilated by women involved with the party. Certainly, women like Becky Buhay displayed an intense admiration for the Soviet Union, even in her private letters home written during her visits to the USSR.<sup>68</sup> It is possible that these uncritical assessments served to

<sup>62</sup> *The Worker*, 4 June 1927.

<sup>63</sup> On the Soviet abortion law see Alix Holt, "Marxism and Women's Oppression," in Tova Yedlin, ed., *Women in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union* (New York 1980).

<sup>64</sup> There is little evidence that the radical views of the Russian Bolshevik Alexandra Kollantai on personal relationships and family life were well known in the Canadian party. In the early 1920s some of Kollantai's work was offered for sale in the CPC press, but this was no longer true by mid-decade. According to William Rodney, *Soldiers of the International*, 43, Florence Custance and Kollantai may have met in Mexico. Custance may have read and been influenced by Kollantai, but there is little evidence that others in the party were well acquainted with her ideas.

<sup>65</sup> *The Worker*, 2 May 1925.

<sup>66</sup> *The Worker*, 2 November 1924.

<sup>67</sup> *The Worker*, 21 March 1925.

<sup>68</sup> See *The Worker*, 30 August and 6 September 1930 for a description of Buhay's first

obscure the complexity of women's oppression, and the extent to which it was embedded in both Russian and Canadian society. On the other hand, one-dimensional *Worker* articles may not have reflected Communists' own personal experience of women's role in the family. Within the party, new forms of relationships and family arrangements were discussed and accepted, although probably only to a limited extent. Some members, for instance, opted for common-law liaisons rather than legal marriages. Finnish members brought to the party an established tradition of common-law marriage, for even pre-war Finnish socialists had made a political point of rejecting church marriage. "We didn't believe in that religious hocus pocus," remembers one Finnish comrade. "When we were married our friends gave us a party . . . or you might put an ad in the paper with your friends' greetings and congratulations."<sup>69</sup> As a result of such experimentation, some party members may have experienced the contradictions of living out female independence in a sexist society. The rejection of marriage as a symbol of women's oppression potentially had a tragic side: dominant social norms in the 1920s saw untraditional relationships as immoral, and in their defiance of socially acceptable behaviour, women could be hurt.<sup>70</sup>

Information on women in the USSR still had a substantial impact on party members, creating a feeling of common cause and international solidarity, thereby sustaining hope in eventual revolution and maintaining party loyalty. Press coverage of women's struggles in other countries was also used to draw lessons about women's opposition to capitalism and to encourage support for the international revolutionary movement. Building upon a long-established tradition of internationalism within the labour and socialist movements, the CPC helped galvanize anger about women's exploitation and arouse legitimacy and hope for communist movements for resistance. Articles on female workers in colonized Asian countries, for example, provided descriptions of women's impoverished and cruel working conditions, and analyzed the economic cause — imperialism — and political cure — communism — for these societies. The struggles of Communist women in the United States and Europe also figured highly in the Communist press: the stories of American textile workers battling police in the South, and the fight of German women for bread and jobs in 1923, became rallying points for Communist loyalty, helping to forge a definition of the movement as just, militant, and destined to victory.

In Canada, International Women's Day was used to enhance these feelings

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trip to the USSR. For letters written during a trip to Russia in the 1950s see U of T, Kenny Collection, Box 41.

<sup>69</sup> Interview of the author and Karen Teeple with Taime Davies, 14 July 1982.

<sup>70</sup> For example, see references to Communists' personal lives in Lita-Rose Betcherman, *The Little Band* (Ottawa 1982), ch. XI. Allan Seager, "Finnish Canadians and the Ontario Miners' Movement," *Polyphony*, 3, 2 (1981) also points out how women could be "punished" by those outside the Communist movement. After the Hollinger mine disaster of 1928, the company refused to compensate the Finnish widows because they had not been legally married.

of international solidarity and to publicize the struggles of Canadian women. In the 1920s this day became a major annual event, celebrated in public meetings which were themselves international in character, encompassing one, two, or three language groups. In the small Alberta mining town of Blairmore, Finnish women co-hosted a gathering with their Ukrainian friends from nearby Coleman. In both Toronto and Montreal, Finnish, Ukrainian, Yiddish, and English-speaking WLLs worked together on the organization of March 8, combining rousing political speeches, solidarity greetings, and musical entertainment into an evening event. International Women's Day meetings often publicized a list of "women's demands" coincident with the party's programme, stressing, for example, the organization of women workers and abuses of the minimum wage.

The tasks of Communist women were not only set in the framework of an international struggle, but were counterposed to the unacceptable and dangerous political aims of middle-class reformers and feminists. Organizations specifically committed to feminism — that is, with changing women's unequal status in society — were weak in the 1920s as the resolution of the suffrage issue had dispersed much of the pre-war feminist movement. There did exist, however, a number of women's reform organizations, like the National Council of Women, women's church auxiliaries, the YWCA, and cultural groups like the Daughters of Scotland; the latter two probably had a substantial working-class membership.

The Communist leadership feared the influence of these groups on working-class women, who, they believed, might be easily patronized and swayed by their social "betters" and thereby have their attention deflected from political and class issues. Indeed, many rank-and-file Communists shared these worries and frustrations. *Woman Worker* correspondent Mary North complained to the editor that working-class women in her Alberta mining town too naively accepted the opinions expressed in bourgeois women's magazines, which pandered to women, diverting them with fashions and pictures of rich movie actresses. Glace Bay WLL activist Annie Whitfield bemoaned the local church's anti-socialist influence on working-class women.<sup>71</sup> The party's fears were grounded, in part, on realistic observations of women's participation in non-political groups like the Daughters of Scotland, and on the numbing influence of anti-socialist and anti-feminist popular magazines and movies in the 1920s.<sup>72</sup> At the same time, many of the warnings about women's participation in middle-class culture embraced the old adage that women's natural deference made them easy prey to counterrevolutionary influences.

<sup>71</sup> *The Woman Worker*, October 1926; *The Worker*, 14 November 1925.

<sup>72</sup> Mary Vipond, "The Image of Women in Canadian Mass Circulation Magazines in the 1920s," in Susan Trofimenkoff and Alison Prentice, eds., *The Neglected Majority: Essays in Canadian Women's History* (Toronto 1977); Mary Ryan, *Womanhood in America* (New York 1975), ch. 4; Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* (New York 1973), ch. 2.

In order to counter the danger posed by middle-class organizations, the Communist press tried to expose and criticize the misguided bourgeois view of feminist and reform groups. In 1927, the *Woman Worker* ridiculed the NCW's efforts to have women senators appointed, and later that year published an open letter to the council, denouncing its attack on socialist Sunday schools and its resolution to "investigate communist education" in Canada.<sup>73</sup> In 1925, at a large Toronto meeting initiated by the WLL to discuss the "protection of womanhood," Florence Custance laid out the league's case for improved social conditions and unionization of women workers.<sup>74</sup> Custance's comments were contrasted with those of reformers like Mrs. Huestis, a former suffragist, now with the Women's League, who voiced the opinion that social conditions alone did not cause prostitution since "these girls" had made a conscious immoral choice, having already "succumbed to the lure of commercialized entertainment and pretty clothes."<sup>75</sup> It was clear, reported the *Worker*, that middle-class women were interested in moral "reform and . . . protection for the feeble-minded" but they did not understand that for working-class girls the real issues were good wages and unionization.<sup>76</sup> There was little to quibble with in the *Worker's* characterization of the paternalistic attitudes of middle-class women like Mrs. Huestis, but its biting comments did not solve the CPC's basic concern that many working-class women joined either non-political, or moderate reform groups.

Hence, following the party's united front strategy of limited but critical participation in non-communist groups, the Women's Department occasionally included some news items on women's reform activities in the *Woman Worker*, and most importantly, tried to maintain contacts with like-minded socialist women in labourite, farm, and peace organizations, in the hopes of drawing them into the communist movement. The leagues, for instance, were interested in making contact with women's farm organizations, although they were hesitant to support those bodies which were allied to local councils of women. The National Council of Women, *The Woman Worker* tried to point out to Saskatchewan women in the United Farmers of Canada, was "well-intentioned" but was basically anti-labour and patronizing to working girls.<sup>77</sup> *The Woman Worker* did print a reply from the farm women, which argued that the local council was its "only contact with urban women" and assuring the *Woman Worker* that farm women still had "independence of action."<sup>78</sup> But Custance had the last word in the exchange, counselling once again the dangers of alliances with middle-class women. Similarly, the Women's Department of the CPC was willing to enter into dialogue with the Women's International League

<sup>73</sup> *The Woman Worker*, April 1927.

<sup>74</sup> *The Worker*, 18 July 1925.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> *The Woman Worker*, October 1927.

<sup>78</sup> *The Woman Worker*, February 1928.

for Peace and Freedom, (WIL) and it supported common causes like the campaign to remove military training from the schools, but it was also publicly critical of what it called the WIL's brand of liberal pacifism.

#### IV

AS THE LABOUR LEAGUES were slowly influenced by the Comintern congress of 1928, their opposition to pacifist groups like the WIL sharpened, and an alternative line of opposition to the "war menace against the Soviet Union" was developed. Until 1929, however, the *Woman Worker* did not completely reflect the left turn of the Comintern, and even then, it was censured for exhibiting "bourgeois feminist tendencies" in its outlook.<sup>79</sup> Until the Third Period and the immersion of the WLLs into the Workers' Unity League, the leagues comprised a unique experiment in Canadian communist history. Although generally controlled by the party, they constituted an organization separate in name and identity from the party, with a membership which went beyond party members and a structure which allowed a degree of local autonomy.

In 1924, it was far from assured that the WLLs would grow from the ten labour leagues then scattered across the country. As secretary of the federation, Custance's task was not an easy one: although the *Worker* was available as a means of publicity and recruitment, she was dependent on local party officials for on-going organizational aid, and numerous references to the low priority of "women's work" in the party suggested that few district organizers had time to organize Women's Labor Leagues. In 1924, Custance later noted, there was some pessimistic speculation about the WLL having any success,<sup>80</sup> and for almost two years the leagues made very slow progress, gaining little support from "our men in the labour movement."<sup>81</sup> Perhaps the leagues' failure to gain affiliation to the TLC, and thus influence in the trade union movement, made them even less important in the eyes of many Communist leaders. Despite such early apathy and pessimism, the leagues did experience substantial growth in the 1920s, expanding to 37 in 1927, and, according to the *Woman Worker*, to 60 in 1929. The success of the leagues can be attributed in large part to Custance's organizational skills and hard work. The existence of a separate women's newspaper sponsored by the federation was also important, for, as Custance herself noted, the *Woman Worker* both sustained and extended the leagues with its wide selection of educational material and by sharing the ideas and inspirational reports of sister leagues.

The highly ethnic character of league membership also pointed to the essential role that the CPC's sister associations, UFLTA and the FOC, played in

<sup>79</sup> U of T, Kenny Collection, Box 1, Closed Letter to the CPC from the ECCI, April 1929.

<sup>80</sup> *The Woman Worker*, September 1928.

<sup>81</sup> *The Woman Worker*, October 1927.



encouraging league activity; as Mary North pointed out, the *Woman Worker* was sold and read concurrently with the Finnish equivalent, *Toveritar*. Women whose home language was Finnish or Ukrainian found a comfortable initiation into the leagues from the culturally and socially supportive atmosphere of the FOC and UFLTA. Finnish leagues, in fact, far outnumbered all other leagues, a phenomenon which may have reflected a more developed political consciousness, or at least a stronger tradition of political organization among Finnish socialist women.<sup>82</sup> During the 1920s the Finnish leagues also had access to their own organizer, Sanna Kannasto, a well-known socialist orator from the Lakehead area, who previously had worked as a travelling speaker and organizer for the SPC and the SDPC. Kannasto, a "small bit of a woman, with piercing eyes" and a "fiery" orator's tongue, was even viewed with some trepidation by the local Finnish WLLers who saw her militant style as a marked contrast to that of many women, especially the cool, "undemonstrative Finns."<sup>83</sup> Kannasto did educational work for the FOC for many years, even taking in promising young comrades for intensive study of socialist theory. One such student spent two weeks at Kannasto's farm, trying to learn public speaking and socialist theory: "a lot of the theory," she later commented "went right over my head."<sup>84</sup>

For the WLLs, consisting largely of housewives and so firmly structured around language groups, directives from the Comintern calling for Bolshevization of the CPC must have had little impact; the nature of league membership made groups based on factory nuclei almost impossible. During the Bolshevization debate, Becky Buhay noted that the CPC's work among women should be conducted in "purely proletarian circumstances," perhaps a critical reference to the WLLs, and the leagues' failure to change their structure probably reinforced organizers' disinterest in their work.<sup>85</sup> Yet the leagues did fill a necessary purpose: based on a socially acceptable auxiliary model, they answered the needs of women who were less proficient than male party members in English, who were not eligible for trade union membership, or welcomed as party cell members. Descriptions of league meetings reveal the specific functions they filled for female sympathizers. Most leagues divided their time between self-education and business meetings, with the latter largely

<sup>82</sup> Becky Buhay claimed that Finnish men, more so than others, allowed their wives to become active in politics. Perhaps Finnish women drew on past traditions of socialist activity in women's groups attached to the SDPC. Some socialists before World War I also implied that Finnish and Jewish women were more active than their English-speaking sisters. See Linda Kealey, "Canadian Socialism and the Woman Question," 91. On Finnish women and socialism before the war, see Varpu Lindstrom-Best, *The Finnish Immigrant Community of Toronto, 1887-1913* (Toronto 1979), and Carl Ross, "The Feminist Dilemma in the Finnish Immigrant Community," *Finnish Americana* (1978).

<sup>83</sup> Interview with Taime Davies, 14 July 1982.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> *The Worker*, 22 August 1925.

devoted to fund-raising. The WLLs held euchres and bazaars, sponsored May Day dances, gathered used clothing for striking workers, and performed other traditional auxiliary functions, donating their proceeds to local party causes or to organizations like the Canadian Labor Defence League (CLDL), an organization which looked after the legal defence of radical trade unionists and Communists. In fact, the WLLs were encouraged by the CPC to affiliate to the CLDL, perhaps because the CLDL was eager to use the WLLs' proven fund-raising talents. (Furthermore, the affiliation of the WLLs with the CLDL was linked at the leadership level by the involvement of Custance and Buhay in both organizations.)

Also in the auxiliary tradition, the labour leagues initiated annual summer camps for Communist youth. WLL camps were usually organized along language lines; Jewish, Finnish, and Ukrainian women, with the aid of the local YCLs were responsible for their own youth groups. The involvement of women in this work was partly the consequence of housewives' "free time" during summer days, but it was also linked to the strong identification of women with the maternal task of "educating the youth for the future." This maternal identification limited the parameters of women's political participation just as the earlier maternal feminism had circumscribed women's role in politics. Nonetheless, the task itself was an important one. A crucial necessity for the party was the augmentation of its ranks, and the youth camps helped to counter the values taught in the public educational institutions with an alternate ideology which would both sustain the loyalty of children of party members, and perhaps increase Communist numbers with additional recruits.

Internally, league activities were directed towards their members' own education; the women spent time reading books, discussing current events, and improving their own understanding of communism. In northern Ontario a travelling library of radical books was circulated between towns, and many local groups spent every second meeting in study sessions discussing books like Bebel's *Woman and Socialism* or works by Marx and Lenin. Some leagues rotated their officers every three months so that all members could gain leadership experience; others planned oratory courses to develop the untapped skills of members who were reluctant to speak in public. By meeting weekly to discuss books, commented one league member, "we have been able to develop our own understanding and skills" and "we are no longer asking our men how we should think or say aloud our thoughts."<sup>86</sup> For many women living in families where men's activities and opinions were considered of primary importance, this self-confidence in itself was undoubtedly an achievement.

Although party officials commended league work, they frequently lamented the lack of new "Anglo-Saxon" recruits to the WLLs, particularly wage-earning women from factories; yet, they were at a loss as to how to change the WLLs' composition — especially when the Women's Department was not high on their priority list. Party leader Jack McDonald claimed that in

<sup>86</sup> *The Woman Worker*, February 1927.

the later 1920s "for two years, the Central Executive Committee never devoted one meeting to discussion of work among women . . . the Central Committee gave absolutely no attention to women's work."<sup>87</sup> Ironically, the large proportion of housewives in the leagues which so concerned Communist leaders gave some question to the idea of "housewife conservatism" propagated by the party. Although the WLL publication often repeated the view that housewives tended towards political apathy and conservatism, it sometimes contained alternative opinions presented by the WLLers themselves. One correspondent, for example, pointed out that women's educational opportunities — "their opportunities to learn the truth" — were fewer, and that conservatism was not only a female prerogative in the working class: "working-class men are also conservative due to the influence of the press, school and church."<sup>88</sup> WLL correspondents often attempted to express their female experience of the world within a class perspective and within their communist politics. Although the *Woman Worker* did not deviate from an overall emphasis on the primacy of class struggle, it did sometimes speak for working-class housewives who felt that within their class, they were accorded an inferior status. Women, one article admitted, had been placed in forms of subjection, bound by male superstition, and treated like "toys and slaves."<sup>89</sup> Another writer suggested that housewives were sometimes the scapegoats of both class and patriarchy: "women are forced into an authority relationship with husbands who have grown to think they are the bosses in the home, and boss wives, as bosses boss them."<sup>90</sup> Women readers were proffered some sympathy for their difficult position in the family, but were counselled against misdirected anger against men. The editor of the *Woman Worker* undoubtedly realized sexual inequalities in marriage would be discussed — for working-class women could not realistically escape such problems — but in the long term, she tried to show "there are no easy cures for sexual inequality in marriage . . . we must see the basic cause of inequality — [capitalism]. . . . Thus, if women want more than a truce, if they want true freedom, the struggle versus capitalism must take precedence."<sup>91</sup>

Similarly, social issues like prostitution and alcoholism were presented in the context of a class analysis, yet with some reference to the immediate experience and suffering of working-class women. Very occasionally, writers in *The Woman Worker* adopted the rhetoric of pre-war reformers by describing, for example, the white slave trade as an "outlet for male licentiousness."<sup>92</sup> More often though, editorials attributed the cause of prostitution and the white slave traffic to the poverty of working-class women, and correspondents

<sup>87</sup> Public Archives of Ontario (PAO), Communist Party of Canada Collection, Report of the 6th National Convention, 31 May-7 June, 1929.

<sup>88</sup> *The Woman Worker*, September 1927.

<sup>89</sup> *The Woman Worker*, March 1928.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> *The Woman Worker*, April 1928.

<sup>92</sup> *The Woman Worker*, December 1927.

decried the hypocrisy of the church and its bourgeois members who used prostitutes while piously speaking against such evils. Similarly, alcoholism was portrayed as a consequence of the alienating capitalist work world, although its detrimental effects on working-class households, and in particular the suffering of women, were noted. There was not complete consistency in the *Woman Worker's* treatment of the liquor problem, for while some writers advised individual "self-control,"<sup>93</sup> others dismissed temperance, railing especially against prohibition as a capitalist endeavour to eke increased surplus value from a more efficient work force.<sup>94</sup> Whatever confusion existed was probably of little matter, for issues like liquor were only rarely considered; they never occupied the focal position in the WLLs that they had in the pre-war feminist movement.

Although the Women's Labor Leagues generally followed the views of the CPC on both social and economic issues, they did develop a measure of autonomy, just as recommendations of the International Women's Secretariat (IWS) were modified to fit Canadian conditions. The CPC, for instance, found it relatively easy to follow the IWS's suggestions to conduct a study on working women, initiate a newspaper for women, or organize annual International Women's Day meetings. But some of the IWS's recommendations, such as its directions to assign a woman active in women's work to every leading party organization, or to integrate women members into *all* areas of party work, were more difficult to emulate, and were therefore bypassed. Moreover, the International's repeated counsel to place first priority on organizing women into factory nuclei was, given the composition of the WLLs, not feasible, so the CPC's Women's Department concentrated on other campaigns for working women, such as the minimum wage. The IWS did recognize that, for campaigns like International Women's Day, each national party would develop its own slogans and demands, deciding what to give prominence to, as "demands will differ in different countries according to their phase of economic development, the strength of the women's movement . . . and so on."<sup>95</sup>

Likewise, the Women's Bureau must have conceded that, within the bounds of general party priorities, the WLL's activism would be shaped by local conditions and needs. In the coal-mining districts of the Crows Nest Pass, for instance, WLLs existed in close alliance with the Communist-dominated Mine Workers Union of Canada (MWUC). The wives and daughters of miners made up the bulk of league membership for, as Mary North pointed out of her own Blairmore group: "naturally . . . we are housewives for jobs here are only in mining and are hardly even accessible to the man."<sup>96</sup> (Although the Crows Nest WLLs had few opportunities to organize women workers, the Lethbridge WLL made one attempt to encourage local cooks and waiters to unionize.) In keeping with the local possibilities for political work, the Crows Nest leagues

<sup>93</sup> *The Woman Worker*, June 1928.

<sup>94</sup> *The Woman Worker*, November 1926.

<sup>95</sup> *Imprecorr.* 4, 11 (14 February 1924).

<sup>96</sup> *The Woman Worker*, July 1927.

concentrated on union and Labour Party support work; an attempt was made to build a wives' auxiliary to the MWUC, donations were made to the Labour Party of Alberta, and some WLL delegates were sent to its convention. The Crows Nest leagues never mentioned lobbying efforts to secure mothers' clinics probably because of small and inadequate local health services, or perhaps because the issue was not deemed appropriate for public discussion. Like most other leagues, the Alberta associations spent a large proportion of their time in fund-raising activities, designed to aid local and international labour causes. Such social fund-raising endeavours had political as well as financial purposes, for May Day dances and union picnics were important stimulants to Communist loyalty and solidarity; the atmosphere created by the women provided a social glue which helped to cement political allegiances.

In the northern Ontario WLLs, members were often the wives of primary resource workers or single domestic workers drawn in by the Finnish connection. Fund-raising for unions and the CLDL, self-education, and the organization of summer camps all formed an essential part of the leagues' work. Again, birth control was not a major public issue, indicating that the *Woman Worker's* leadership on this issue may not have reflected the view of all the WLLs, overcoming their reluctance to address women's sexual and reproductive rights. "Our WLL members," recalled one woman, "were extremely embarrassed when Kannasto insisted on talking about sexuality and birth control to the women's meetings."<sup>97</sup> As in northern Ontario, in B.C. the Finnish leagues were drawn together by common ethnic ties and pursued activities from this identification: in Vancouver the WLL tried to organize Finnish domestics, and in Sointula the league became active in the local co-op store. The B.C. Finnish leagues, cut off by the Rockies from the rest of Canada, organized their own conventions, passing resolutions which were carried back to local leagues, pressed on the B.C. section of the Labour Party, or lobbied at local governments. Particular ethnic and local concerns were evidenced by calls, for example, for legislation permitting civil marriage — a reflection of the anti-church views of the Finnish leagues.

Alberta and northern Ontario leagues sometimes sponsored regional conventions as well, but this practice was often forgone by the larger urban leagues of Toronto and Montreal, with their higher membership numbers, and easier access to party machinery and other Communist groups. In Toronto, the WLL had a major hand in editing the *Woman Worker* and, during Custance's illness in 1928-9, helped sustain the magazine's production. The Toronto league was active in union support work but without the single-union emphasis of an area like the Pass: its activities included a boycott campaign during a bakers' strike, and during 1928 a joint effort with the local YCL to organize York Knitting Mills. Although, in the latter case, the Toronto WLL's leafletting campaign at the factory gates did not work, it must be seen in the context of a small group of women in contest with immense barriers to organizing a mobile, female labour

<sup>97</sup> Interview with Taime Davies.

force in times of uncertain employment opportunities. In keeping with its urban setting, the Toronto league, like those in Montreal and Regina, spent a large amount of time on the minimum wage campaign, and it kept up public pressure on the local government for mothers' clinics. In addition, urban leagues had greater opportunities to join with other communist and labour organizations in united front work, for example, co-sponsoring rallies and demonstrations such as the large defence meeting held in Montreal for Sacco and Vanzetti.

Thus, although the labour leagues followed the general guidelines laid down by the CPC's Women's Department, there existed some variation according to regional conditions. This local autonomy may have been in part a consequence of the Women's Bureau's flexibility in approach, but it was also the result of party disinterest and default: communication problems (especially between an English executive and language-based leagues), geography, and disorganization were undoubtedly factors creating the diversity of the league experience. After the 1929 CPC convention, questionnaires were sent out to the leagues to ascertain their membership and their recent activities; the central office seemed to have both inadequate records and very little concrete knowledge of the WLL network. This may have been a consequence of disarray in the wake of Custance's death, for Custance, it was said, was compelled to run a "one-woman department."<sup>98</sup> But in the final analysis, it was also a simple reflection of the secondary nature of the woman question in the party.

## V

ALTHOUGH THE WOMAN QUESTION remained secondary to the major tasks of the Communist Party of Canada, there is no doubt that its definition had been clarified and its significance had greatly increased since the time of the pre-war Canadian left. The CPC's agitational and organizational work among women was shaped primarily by the example of the Soviet Union and advice from the Communist International. To Canadian Communists, the impressive transformation of women's status in Russia implied both the value of the USSR's strategic suggestions and if imitated, the possibility of similar successes. At the same time, directives from the IWS were necessarily adapted to Canadian conditions, and thus the CPC's own understanding of Marxism, and the concerns of Canadian Communists also influenced the party's programme, giving added emphasis to the discussion of particular issues and shaping the activities of local labour leagues.

The party attempted to build a communist women's movement which was firmly rooted in the same political goals as the revolutionary movement as a whole, and which invariably stressed the primacy of class-based political activity. To this end, the most essential appeal to working-class women was made

<sup>98</sup> PAQ, Communist Party of Canada Collection, Report from Sudbury district Executive Committee of the WLLs to Executive Committee of the Federation of WLLs, 5 February 1930.

around economic issues: working-class housewives were reminded of their small family income and the limited opportunities for their children, and wage-earning women were reminded of the exploitative character of their wage labour. In attempting to organize housewives into labour support groups, the party was following an established tradition on the Canadian left and in the labour movement, but the CPC's revitalized organization, the Federation of Women's Labor Leagues, had the advantage of direction and coordination from a centralized Leninist party, as well as a feeling of close connection to an international movement. These factors stimulated the growth of the leagues as a national movement, although the centralized party did pose the danger of ideological rigidity and strict leadership control: decisions on programme and strategy tended to flow downwards from the leadership to the membership, not vice versa.

The Women's Bureau focused its agitational efforts at the unique exploitation of women under capitalism and, while some of their efforts, such as the creation of factory nuclei and the unionization of women workers, were not successful, others, like the minimum wage campaign, which used the WLLs' small numbers yet determined militance, were more instrumental in exposing women's inequality under capitalism. To what extent these campaigns and organizing schemes drew in new recruits is not entirely clear. Women still constituted a minority of party membership<sup>99</sup> and although the leagues did expand during the 1920s, the recruits tended to be party wives and members of the FOC and UFLTA rather than the desired newcomers from the factories — a fact which the party continually lamented.

Although economic issues formed the core of the Communist programme, non-economic issues were not ignored, partly because of the wide range of social reforms enacted in the USSR after the revolution, but also because of the interests and needs of Canadian women. In the case of the birth control issue, the CPC's advocacy of mothers' clinics was argued primarily in light of the medical, health, and economic needs of working-class women and in terms of the right to self-determination of working-class families. Although quite different from contemporary feminist arguments favouring personal choice and control, the Communist case, in the context of the birth control debates of the 1920s, was a progressive voice with few allies. Moreover, it is possible that women in the party saw birth control more basically as a right for all women, but public arguments took a more pragmatic and pro-natalist direction.

In lobbying for mothers' clinics or by doing their auxiliary support work, the WLLs were involved in the communist movement at a different level than other members and sometimes with a different rationale. Women's supportive

<sup>99</sup> There are no precise membership numbers showing the ratio of men to women in the party in the 1920s. However, later reports in the 1930s, as well as references in *The Communist International* to the average number of women in most national communist parties both indicate that women comprised less than 25 per cent of the party, probably as low as 12 per cent.

auxiliary work was essential to the life of the movement; yet, it also placed them in sex-stereotyped roles which isolated them from power and decision-making. Except for Florence Custance, and later Becky Buhay and Annie Buller, women were not represented in the Central Committee of the party, and even at the lower level, party officials were predominantly men. In fact, some WLL members were not officially party members; it was said that if only one family member could afford a party card, it would be the "head" of the family unit. "Women's place," remembers one Party member,

was in the home. It's alright to organize women, men would say, but not my wife! So, when it came to going to a meeting, the men would go. It was more important. The men were the "brains." The women were in the kitchen. But they still supported so many causes.<sup>100</sup>

At the same time, women's "place in the home" was used as a radicalizing tool: the demands for bread and peace were used as rallying cries to mobilize wives and mothers. On the question of peace, women were appealed to on the basis of their maternal instincts, yet were simultaneously warned against a sentimental humanist pacifism clouding an objective, economic analysis.

Women were drawn into party work as a consequence of their experience of working-class life, their contacts with other Communist activists, and their re-education through socialist literature. Yet despite their primary class loyalties women's political involvement *did* differ appreciably from that of men. Their political work reflected the sexual division of labour in the wider world: it was closely connected to their maternal and family roles. Because working women were a minority of the work force, and because Communists, like the earlier Canadian socialists, readily accepted the ideal of a male breadwinner and family wage, woman's political consciousness and her political activities were interpreted in the context of her domestic role. In the case of wage-earning women, the party assumed that their participation in production was the key to their radicalization, but with housewives, the party clearly saw women's personal and family concerns as crucial to their mobilization. For women who were involved in domestic labour, this perception may have been fair, although an analysis of the left unfortunately explores what the Communists thought of working-class women, not what working-class women themselves thought. Indeed, in the case of the party's oft-repeated fears of women's conservatism, there is contradictory evidence: although women were less likely to join the party, this was not necessarily a reflection of their reactionary, bourgeois mentality. In labour struggles women's class consciousness was clearly articulated, but a leap into political action possibly was precluded by women's family responsibilities, by the unwelcoming attitudes of male party members, or even by the various influences which kept working-class men from joining the party. Also, women's politicization may have taken a different route from men's. Women, for example, may have been radicalized on the birth control issue but not on trade union concerns, while men's interests were

<sup>100</sup> Interview with Taime Davies.



simply reversed; however, the secondary nature of the woman question inevitably gave the latter issue the weight of importance.

Although woman's role in the family was seen as crucial to her political understanding, it was not analyzed as critically as her role in production, or judged important to her oppression. While the problems of working-class housewives were sometimes explored, in the final analysis, women's maternal role was sentimentalized. The Women's Bureau, and certainly the *Woman Worker* never limited themselves to a single-minded economism which rejected all issues of women's sexual subordination: these concerns were alluded to and occasionally discussed in a manner which provided a supportive and sympathetic dimension to women involved in the movement. Nonetheless, the solution to sexual oppression was always seen in class terms: the overwhelming primacy of class struggle and the necessity of working-class solidarity were of first importance, and indeed, they became of absolute and paramount importance to the organization of women during the next period of the CPC's evolution.

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