

Feminism as a Class Act: Working-Class Feminism and the Women's Movement in Canada

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Article abstract

There is a widespread claim that the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s was middle-class and that its politics of reforming the state reflected the concerns of middle-class women. This paper challenges that claim, arguing instead that the development of the women's movement created an environment in which a union-based, working-class feminism became an important political factor. Working-class and socialist-feminist activists developed a strong feminist presence in the labour movement and a significant working-class orientation in the women's movement that both continue to influence the current women's movement.

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Feminism as a Class Act: Working-Class Feminism and the Women's Movement in Canada

Meg Luxton

Introduction

IN 1996 THE CANADIAN Labour Congress (CLC) and the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC) organized a national women's march against poverty.¹ With the slogan "For Bread and Roses, For Jobs and Justice," caravans left both the west and east coasts on 14 May, following the CLC convention in Vancouver. The marchers travelled for a month, visiting over 90 communities and participating in events involving about 50,000 women. They met in Ottawa on 15 June for the largest women's demonstration in Canadian history and NAC's annual general meeting.²

¹The inspiration for this march came from the 1995 march of women in Québec who left Montréal, Longueuil and Rivière-du-Loup on 26 May and marched over 200 kilometres to Québec City where on 4 June they presented the government with a series of demands intended to alleviate women's poverty, such as access to jobs, higher education, equal pay, and services for immigrant women. Buoyed by the success of that march, Québec women took to the Fourth International United Nations and NGO Conferences on Women at Beijing in August/September 1995 a proposal for an international women's march in 2000. In Montréal, on 18 October 1998, 140 women from 65 countries adopted a platform of demands for the World March of Women in the Year 2000. On International Women's Day, 8 March 2000, women's groups in over 150 countries launched the World March which terminated at the United Nations on 17 October 2000. The Bread and Roses March of 1996 was part of this on-going initiative.

²Judy Rebeck and Kike Roach, *Politically Speaking* (Vancouver 1996), 33-34. The Canadian Labour Congress produced a video of this march called "For Bread and Roses For Jobs and Justice: The Women's March Against Poverty," 1996.

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This alliance of the main national union organization and the largest national organization of the autonomous women's movement was based on demands focused specifically on the situations of working-class and poor women. The demands explicitly linked struggles for both women's equality and anti-racism with working-class struggles for more equitable distributions of wealth and access to resources. As NAC President Sunera Thobani declared, "women's dreams of equality can never be realized in a society polarized between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots,' where the poorer regions of the country are marginalized, racism grows, and the most vulnerable members of our community are abandoned."³

In this paper, I argue that the political links between the labour movement and the women's movement, represented by this march, with its explicit focus on working-class and poor women's issues, came about because of the existence of a union-based, working-class feminism that has been a key player in the women's movement, the labour movement, and the left since the late 1960s and early 1970s. It has become popular in recent years to assert that the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s was largely middle class and that its politics reflected the concerns and interests of such women.⁴ I think this argument is incorrect in the Canadian context and I suggest that such beliefs are part of a larger pattern in which both working-class women and their organizing efforts, and left-wing or socialist feminism, get written out of, or "hidden from history."⁵

In her study of women auto workers, Pam Sugiman has demonstrated the existence of "working-class feminism":

Contrary to the popular belief that the North American women's movement was an exclusively middle-class development, the experiences of female auto workers suggest that a distinct "feminist trade unionism" emerged in the 1960s.⁶

The feminism Sugiman identifies was not unique to auto workers. In this paper, I argue, against the formulation that the women's movement was middle class and focused on reforming the state, that working-class and socialist feminist activists developed a strong feminist presence in the labour movement and a significant working-class orientation in the women's movement.⁷ I document some of the

³National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC) and the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) "Women to March: For Bread and Roses, For Jobs and Justice," Press Release, Toronto, 8 March 1996.

⁴Janine Brodie, *Politics on the Margins: Restructuring and the Canadian Women's Movement* (Halifax 1995), 10.

⁵Sheila Rowbotham, *Hidden From History: Rediscovering Women in History from the 17th Century to the Present* (New York 1974).

⁶Pam Sugiman, *Labour's Dilemma: The Gender Politics of Auto Workers in Canada, 1937-1979* (Toronto 1994), 156.

⁷The other charge has been that the women's movement, composed predominantly of white women, has been unwilling and unable to deal with racism. That is a related but different

dynamics in the development of the women's movement in the 1960s and 1970s, that created an environment in which a union-based, working-class feminism found a space and became an important political player. That presence has shaped the subsequent development of the women's movement in Canada. The 1996 march was one expression of that politics.

The Context for Feminist Organizing in Canada

The 1996 alliance between the CLC as a federation of member unions and NAC as a coalition of groups from the autonomous women's movement, and the organization of the March as a series of events in different communities, illustrated some of the aspects of feminist organizing particular to Canada. Any efforts to build national or pan-Canadian, extra-parliamentary political organizations confront two difficulties specific to the national situation that shape their politics and organizational structures. First, Canada's relatively small population, spread out over a large geographic area, and its federated state structure mean that organizing typically occurs at a local or regional level, reflecting regional differences based on local and diverse economies, provincial or territorial and municipal legislation, and linguistic, racialized, ethnic, or national cultures, and patterns of settlement. The political differences that hamper building pan-Canadian movements are compounded by the logistical difficulties and financial costs imposed by the physical distances.

Second, the dynamics of Québec as a distinct nation, inside and subordinated to the rest of Canada and particularly the Canadian state, has generated two significantly different political currents: francophone feminists in Québec and what

history to the study of class dynamics and I have not taken it up here. At present there is no adequate analysis of racism in the women's movement, just as there is no systematic analysis of the relations among the various women's movements, particularly among aboriginal women, francophone women outside of and in Québec, and women in the rest of Canada. Working on this paper has reinforced my frustration that so little of the history of the last 30 years of the women's movement has been written up. There are some provocative insights emerging in the USA as women's liberation activists challenge the presentation of their history. Patricia Romney documents a group of 50 women of colour based in New York and Oakland, California, who — along with other Black activists in the sixties and seventies — became the forgotten women in subsequent rewritings of women's liberation as exclusively white. See Patricia Romney, unpublished notes prepared for Roundable Discussion "Writing about a Visionary Movement in the 'Get Real' World of the '90s: The History of Women's Liberation in the United States," 10th Berkshire Women's Conference, State University of North Carolina, June 1996 cited in Lynne Segal, *Why Feminism?* (New York 1999), 10.

In this paper I do not deal with the women's movements in Québec or of aboriginal women. I focus exclusively on the women's movement in the rest of Canada and many of my examples are drawn from Ontario, or Toronto, because that is where I was located and so I have knowledge about and evidence for such activities. Alice de Wolff has pointed out that women from the west (or anywhere else) would have a somewhat different take on this history.

gets awkwardly called the feminist movement "in the rest of Canada." Co-operation and collaboration between these two movements has been difficult and uneven. The colonization of aboriginal or indigenous peoples and their efforts to resist and to assert claims for self-determination have generated a number of aboriginal women's groups allied together in a Native Women's movement autonomous from but with links to the other currents of the women's movement.⁸

Thus federally, there are at least three distinct women's movements: the movement in the rest of Canada, the francophone movement in Québec, and the movements of First Nations women.⁹ As immigrant women, women of colour, and women who for reasons of language, ethnicity, national origin, or skin colour are subject to racism began to organize, they challenged especially the movement in the rest of Canada for failing to deal with racism, and to a certain extent formed another current. As a result, as Hamilton and Barrett note, "A belief in undivided sisterhood was never very marketable in Canada."¹⁰ Both strategically and organizationally, feminism in Canada has tended toward a politics of solidarity based on coalitions that recognize different constituencies. That dynamic created a space and legitimacy for union-based, working-class feminism.¹¹

The important position of working-class women as part of the revitalization of the women's movement in the rest of Canada in the 1960s was stimulated by at least three distinct, though clearly related developments: the increased education and labour market participation of women through the 1960s and 1970s and the related growing strength of working-class women in the labour movement; the organizational practices of the autonomous women's movement, especially as developed in the Nation Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC), a national coalition of women's groups; and the socialist feminist politics that developed as part of the early women's liberation movement. These created a political terrain in which union feminism was able to grow, providing a significant base for the larger women's movement and transmitting basic feminist perspectives into the wider society.

⁸Kathleen Jamieson, "Multiple Jeopardy: the Evolution of A Native Women's Movement," *Atlantis* 4 (1979), 157-177 esp. 161.

⁹Jill Vickers, Pauline Rankin, and Christine Appelle, *Politics as if Women Mattered: A Political Analysis of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women* (Toronto 1993), 18.

¹⁰Roberta Hamilton and Michèle Barrett, eds. *The Politics of Diversity: Feminism, Marxism and Canadian Society* (London 1986), 4.

¹¹Heather Jon Maroney, "Feminism at Work," in Heather Jon Maroney and Meg Luxton, eds., *Feminism and Political Economy: Women's Work, Women's Struggles* (Toronto 1987), 86-87.

Women in the Labour Force: Challenges to the Unions

During the 1960s, as the college and university sector expanded, the proportion of women and students from working-class families attending universities and colleges increased. While the growing numbers of women with post-secondary education meant that the disparities between women have increased over the last 40 years, with a small number of elite women earning significantly higher incomes than the majority, it has also produced a layer of professional women who to varying degrees have used their skills to advance women — staffing women's medical and legal clinics, challenging school curricula by developing anti-sexist and anti-racist pedagogies, taking feminist politics into the formal political arenas, and working for women in both the labour movement and the autonomous women's movement.¹²

As the women's movement grew, young women students confronted the deeply entrenched sexism in the universities and colleges. Developing increasingly sophisticated critiques of the traditions of formal knowledge, in the early 1970s they created Women's Studies as the academic wing of the women's movement.¹³ Informed by the progressive politics of the student movement and the growth of left-wing organizations, some women combined a left-wing women's liberation politics and a concern for working-class issues with a developing socialist feminist theorizing to produce a body of research on working-class women, and to a lesser extent on aboriginal and black women, women of colour, immigrant women, and other minority groups.¹⁴ As Women's Studies became institutionalized, its explicit links to the activist women's movement were often weakened or lost, but it remains a source of scholarship which includes important work on and for, and sometimes by, working-class women and unions.¹⁵

¹²Sherrill MacLean, *Invisible Women: The Women Who Run Canada* (Toronto 1992), 75.

¹³Alison Prentice, Paula Bourne, Gail Cuthbert Brandt, Beth Light, Wendy Mitchinson, and Naomi Black, *Canadian Women A History*, second edition (Toronto 1996), 426.

¹⁴See for example, Himani Bannerji, "Introducing Racism: notes towards an anti-racist feminism," *Resources for Feminist Research*, 16 (1987), 10-12; Dionne Brand, "Black Women in Toronto: Gender, Race and Class," *Fireweed* (Summer/Fall 1984), 26-43; Patricia Monture-Angus, *Thunder in my Soul: A Mohawk Woman Speaks* (Halifax 1996); Rosemary Brown, *Being Brown* (Toronto 1989) and the articles and the works discussed in, Hamilton and Barrett, *The Politics of Diversity*.

¹⁵See for example: Linda Briskin and Lynda Yanz, eds., *Union Sisters: Women in the Labour Movement* (Toronto 1983); Linda Briskin and Pat McDermott, eds., *Women Challenging Unions: Feminism, Democracy and Militancy* (Toronto 1993), Charlene Gannage, *Double Day, Double Bind: Women Garment Workers* (Toronto 1986); Meg Luxton, *More Than a Labour of Love: Three Generations of Women's Work in the Home* (Toronto 1980); Meg Luxton and June Corman, "Getting to Work: The Women Back Into Stelco Campaign," *Labour/Le Travail*, (1991), 149-185.

The 1960s also marked a significant change in women's labour force participation. While the actual number of women in the labour force, and the percentage of women compared to men, both steadily increased throughout the century, they increased dramatically between 1960 and 1980. In 1961, almost 30 per cent of women were in the paid labour force and they were about 30 per cent of the total labour force. By 1981 more than 50 per cent of women, including married women, were in the paid labour force and women were increasingly in the labour force even when they had young children.¹⁶

Despite the dramatic changes in women's levels of education, and their increased numbers in paid employment, the labour force in the 1960s was significantly sex segregated and women's earnings remained considerably lower than men's.¹⁷ In many workplaces women confronted sexist discrimination and harassment. More than men, women also had to juggle the often conflicting demands of both their paid employment and domestic, family, and community responsibilities, especially for child care. Thus, as increasing numbers of women were in paid labour for longer periods of their lives, and especially when their children were young, they confronted the sexism of the sexual division of labour, and inequalities and discrimination in the paid work force. Feminism offered many of them a framework that made sense of their experiences as women and a politics that made struggles for change seem possible.¹⁸

The labour movement in the early 1960s, based mainly in male-dominated occupations, was organizationally overwhelmingly male. In 1962 women were only 16.4 per cent of all union members although they were about 30 per cent of the total paid labour force.¹⁹ Politically the labour movement's positions on women were more contradictory. Through the first half of the 20th century, the labour movement as a whole had been conflicted about ways of responding to women workers. From the beginning, some unions and many individual activists fought for women's rights as workers and as union members. Particularly those unions with a socialist orientation or with significant numbers of their members affiliated with the Communist or Socialist parties, had explicit policies supporting equality for all oppressed peoples and often took strong positions supporting women

¹⁶Statistics Canada, "Historical Labour Force Statistics," Catalogue number 71-201 (Ottawa 1995); Statistics Canada, "Labour Force Annual Averages," Catalogue number 71-220-XPB (Ottawa 1996), B-8.

¹⁷This continues to be the case. A study by Statistics Canada of 20 million tax returns for 1995 found that women earned on average 58 per cent of what men earned, that for every 10 men earning \$100,000 or more, only 1 woman earned that much, and women were the majority of the 25 per cent of the population earning less than \$10,000 (CBC Radio, *The World at Six*, 14 July 1997).

¹⁸See for example, Workers' Unity, "Salt of the Earth Two for the Price of One," *Workers' Unity Voice of the UAW Rank and File* (Windsor 1971) in *Corrective Collective #6, Women Unite!* (Toronto 1972).

¹⁹Julie White, *Sisters and Solidarity: Women and Unions in Canada* (Toronto 1993), 56.

workers.²⁰ The majority of unions, however, reflecting the prevailing sexism of the times, had not given particular support to women workers.²¹ Analyzing the labour movement's response to women in the period from 1881 to 1921, Julie White argues:

Unions were faced with the reality that single women were a small and transient contingent of the labour force, while the vast majority of married women were dependent upon their men's wages. Confronted with the employers' use of cheap female labour to undercut men's wages, and unable to move beyond the ideology of women's domestic nature, most often unions failed to organize women workers and turned instead to protective legislation and the idea of the family wage to deal with the "problem" of the working woman.²²

By the early 1960s most unions either continued the practices White describes or, especially in workplaces with significant numbers of women, conceived of the women as "workers" just like men, ignoring gender differences.²³ Women workers themselves often shared that perspective.²⁴ But when apparently gender-neutral policies and practices ignore gender differences, "issues are shaped according to men's lives, men's visions, and men's needs."²⁵ Some of the more politically progressive unions began to address women's issues explicitly. In 1964, for example, the United Auto Workers held its first conference for women workers and called for full equality.²⁶

As more and more women were in the labour force, and as the labour movement began organizing new sectors such as the public service where there were large numbers of women, the conflict intensified between sexist gender-neutral practices and the working lives of many union members, especially women. Sugiman describes as "labour's dilemma" this ambivalent relationship between the labour movement and wage earning women:

²⁰Joan Sangster *Dreams of Equality: Women on the Canadian Left* (Toronto 1989); Julie Guard "The Woman Question in the Canadian UE," PhD thesis, University of Toronto, 1994.

²¹For an example from the early 1970s of a women's liberation activist's critique of the way unions and union men treated women workers, see Jean Rands, "Toward an Organization of Working Women", in Corrective Collective # 6, *Women Unite!* (Toronto 1972), 141-148.

²²White, *Sisters and Solidarity*, 43.

²³Renée Geoffroy, *Attitude of Union Workers to Women in Industry*, Studies of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada, 9 (Ottawa 1971).

²⁴Ester Reiter, "First Class Workers Don't Want Second Class Wages: The Lanark Strike in Dunnville, Ontario," in Joy Parr, ed., *A Diversity of Women: Ontario, 1945-1980* (Toronto 1995), 168-199.

²⁵Sugiman, *Labour's Dilemma*, 10.

²⁶Pam Sugiman "Unionism and Feminism in the Canadian Auto Workers Union, 1961-1992," in Linda Briskin and Patricia McDermott, eds., *Women Challenging Unions* (Toronto 1993), 172-188.

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When women workers make demands in the industry and in their union, they uncover the masculine biases. When women try to rewrite the agenda, some men resist. There is conflict and struggle. We can see the gender politics of the union.²⁷

Between 1965 and 1975 the number of employed women in Canada increased by 79 per cent; the number of women union members increased by 144 per cent.²⁸ The proportion of union members who were women increased from 16 per cent in 1962 to nearly 40 per cent in the 1990s.²⁹ Inevitably the gender politics of the labour movement became more visible.³⁰

Feminism and Unions: Working-Class Feminism

More and more women confronted both the pressures of their paid employment, increasingly combined with domestic labour and child care, and the gender politics of the labour movement, which rarely addressed the specific concerns of women. As they articulated their concerns, and fought in the workplace and in the unions for better conditions for women, they fueled the developing women's movement. In that re-emerging feminism of the late 1960s and early 1970s, many of them found a discourse that offered a critique of their daily lives and possibilities for change. While only a small core became activists in both the labour movement and the women's movement, feminist ideas became widespread:

While only a minority of women were activists, others were not untouched by the politics of the women's movement. "Union-wise" feminists had educated their sisters in various ways and degrees. Even women who clung to conventional beliefs and arrangements modified their strategies and filtered them through new ideas. In many women, elements of feminism coexisted (uneasily) with patriarchal ideologies.³¹

Not surprisingly, working-class women focused most of their energy on trying to force employers to pay them fair wages and ensure them job security and safe working conditions. The viciousness of employer resistance revealed how important women's low wages and unregulated working conditions were, and are, to the process of capital accumulation and profit making. For example, in the Fleck strike in Ontario in 1978, 120 workers, mostly immigrant women, were out for six months trying to get a first contract. Women's liberation groups supported the workers who eventually won but only after weeks of police harassment, including arrests and beatings. The police bill came to about two million dollars (about \$16,000 per striker!). As the plant owner was related to the then Ontario Attorney General, the

²⁷ Sugiman, *Labour's Dilemma*, 10.

²⁸ Ontario Women's Bureau, *Women and Labour Unions* (Toronto 1977).

²⁹ White, *Sisters and Solidarity*, 56.

³⁰ Canadian Union of Public Employees, *The Status of Women in CUPE: la Situation de la femme dans le SCFP* (Ottawa 1971).

³¹ Sugiman, *Labour's Dilemma*, 184.

strikers and their supporters came to recognize that the socialist feminist argument about the links between capital and the state had some legitimacy.³² Heather Jon Maroney's analysis of the impact of that strike on the women workers shows how their self-organization in struggle fostered a more general working-class feminist analysis:

Militant strike action by women is also an objective challenge to their economic exploitation, their individuation into the illusory privacy of the family, and the ideological construction of women as passive dependents protected by men which is at the core of women's place in the contemporary capitalist sexual division of labour. At Fleck, the strikers explicitly articulated this challenge.... The lesson that they confirmed was that, given the right political conditions, self-organization in struggle will radicalize, mobilize and broaden feminist consciousness and action.³³

As their numbers grew, union women challenged the sexist structures and organizational cultures of their unions and worked to get unions to adopt positions that would directly affect women. A number of individual women, with years of union organizing experience behind them, were well-positioned in existing union organizations to raise such issues. Activists such as Madelaine Parent, of the Canadian Textile and Chemical Union and one of the founders of the Canadian Confederation of Unions, Evelyn Armstrong of the United Electrical Workers, and Grace Hartman from the Canadian Union of Public Employees led the fights inside the labour movement by strengthening their ties with the women's movement.

The 1970s in particular was a period of women's organizing activities in unions. For example, at the 1970 United Auto Workers convention, union women called for "full equality now."³⁴ The fight for affirmative action started with struggles to get women hired into so-called non-traditional jobs or all-male preserves at workplaces such as Stelco and Inco or in the trades; such initiatives demanded union support for challenges to employers.³⁵ Union women formed organizations to help them fight inside the labour movement to improve women's situations; for example, in March 1976 Organized Working Women (OWW) was formed in Ontario, with Evelyn Armstrong as its first president, with a membership restricted to women already in unions, while in September 1979 Saskatchewan Working Women (SWW) formed with its membership open to all women who agreed with its objectives. Frustrated by the lack of support for women in the existing unions and outraged by the failure of the union movement to organize in predominantly female workplaces, a group of socialist feminists in 1972 formed

³²Nancy Adamson, Linda Briskin, and Margaret McPhail, *Feminist Organizing for Change: The Contemporary Women's Movement in Canada* (Toronto 1988), 139.

³³Maroney, "Feminism at Work," 94.

³⁴Sugiman, *Labour's Dilemma*, 181.

³⁵Jennifer Penny, ed., *Hard Earned Wages: Women Fighting for Better Work* (Toronto 1983); Luxton and Corman, "Getting to Work."

an independent union in BC, the Service, Office and Retail Workers' Union of Canada (SORWUC).³⁶ Unable to sustain their efforts in the face of employers' hostility and the reluctance of the union movement to support them, they collapsed after a few years but their initiative prodded the union movement to pay more attention to predominantly female sectors of the labour force.³⁷

Responding to increasing pressures from their members, unions began to take up union women's issues.³⁸ They held conferences, educationals, and training programmes. Many unions from locals to national organizations developed women's committees or caucuses intended to help women identify their concerns, develop the strategies and tactics to advance their issues, and strengthen their capacities to intervene in the male-dominated culture of the union. In 1965 the Ontario Federation of Labour set up its first women's committee, which was chaired by Grace Hartman, then a Vice-President of CUPE. In 1966 that committee organized a conference on Women and Work.³⁹ In 1976 the CLC held its first conference for women union activists. Unions developed new structures and new positions. In 1977 the Ontario Public Service Employees Union hired its first full-time equal opportunity co-ordinator. Recognizing their failure to get women into leadership positions, some bodies developed affirmative action measures. In 1984 for example, the CLC designated a minimum of six women vice-presidents. They recognized that when competent women leaders are visible, more women are likely to participate and more men and women are able to accept women in leadership positions. Even more important were the positions unions adopted both in contract negotiations on, for example, maternity and parental leave or same-sex spousal benefits, and in union policies such as providing child care at conventions. Finally, unions were also part of, and supported the activities and organizations of the women's movement. They co-sponsored specific activities such as International Women's Day demonstrations and joined coalitions to work on campaigns such as those for employment and pay equity, access to abortions, and quality child care.

Such efforts publicly recognized that discrimination against women existed, and identified it as a problem. They also went some way toward improving the situation. What they illustrate is the extent to which women pushed for a new gender politics more favourable to women both inside the unions, and, through their unions, in the women's movement. However, having women in leadership does not necessarily mean that those women are concerned with women's issues and union-organized women's caucuses may easily become just another unit of the

³⁶Jackie Ainsworth, *et. al.*, "Getting Organized: In the Feminist Unions," in Maureen FitzGerald, Connie Guberman, and Margie Wolfe, eds., *Still Ain't Satisfied* (Toronto 1982), 132-140.

³⁷Bank Book Collective, *An Account to Settle: The Story of the United Bank Workers (SORWUC)* (Vancouver 1979).

³⁸White, *Sisters and Solidarity*.

³⁹Susan Crean, *Grace Hartman: A Woman For Her Time* (Vancouver 1995) 68.

existing union structure. If progressive union leaderships promote demands that many members do not actively support, contract negotiations on these issues are likely to founder and it does women little good if their issues are the first to be dropped in negotiations. Only if enough members are mobilized and committed to struggling around particular concerns, are those issues likely to remain on the agenda with any likelihood of long-term success. So, what is more important is the extent to which women workers themselves are mobilized in their particular workplaces and throughout their unions. In the period from the late 1960s through the 1970s, a majority of women workers supported basic feminist equality demands. A minority of activists also supported more explicit socialist feminist demands. In combination they generated a union perspective on feminism that developed by the end of the 1970s into a distinct and important current of working-class feminism in the women's movement. Pam Sugiman describes this process among women in the United Auto Workers Union (UAW):

A core group of women with years of active involvement in the UAW fervently threw itself into the contemporary feminist debate. These women became the driving force behind the fight for women's rights in the auto plants.⁴⁰

Some of them also became a driving force for working-class issues in the autonomous women's movement.

Coalition Politics: NAC and Unions

In the period between the ebb of the first wave of feminism in the 1920s and its revitalisation in the 1960s, a range of women's organizations continued to provide services for, and work on behalf of women. Some, such as the National Council of Women of Canada (NCWC) (founded in 1893), the Canadian Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs (BPW) (founded 1930), and the Canadian Negro Women's Association (founded in 1951), involved women in national politics. Many others were local, focused on neighbourhoods or municipalities such as the Association of Women Electors, which from 1937 to 1986 monitored Toronto municipal affairs.⁴¹ Some, such as the various groups associated with the Communist and Socialist parties, or the Voice of Women formed in 1960 to work for peace, were tied to international politics. While the groups were often dispersed and disparate, they were also sometimes loosely linked both by organizational connections, and through personal ties among members.

In the period when there was no mass mobilization of women, the most prominent organizations were those able to attract public attention, often because although they lobbied various levels of government on behalf of women, they requested reforms rather than dramatic changes. Typically such groups were

⁴⁰Sugiman, *Labour's Dilemma*, 151.

⁴¹Kay Macpherson, *When In Doubt, Do Both: The Times of My Life* (Toronto 1994), 79.

organized nationally with provincial or territorial and local chapters.⁴² Their national (and sometimes provincial or territorial) leaderships were often very active; the chapters were more or less active, usually at a very local level. The leaders of these organizations were typically part of the same class as federal politicians and often had personal ties to them.⁴³ They were usually white, English speaking, and of Anglo or European backgrounds, either professional women concerned with improving their own circumstances or wives of professional men who had the time, energy, and resources to take up social and political issues.⁴⁴ A similar layer of white French-speaking Québécoises played a similar role in Québec politics. A very few of them were also associated with the anglophone national organizations.⁴⁵

⁴²Some of these organizations (followed by their founding date) include: The Women's Christian Temperance Union (first Canadian local formed in Picton, Ontario) 1874; The National Council of Women of Canada 1893; National Council of Jewish Women 1893; The Nation Young Women's Christian Association 1894; Federated Women's Institutes of Canada 1919; Canadian Federation of University Women 1919; Canadian Federation of Business and professional Women's Clubs 1930; Congress of Canadian Women 1950; Canadian Negro Women's Association 1951; Voice of Women 1960; Planned Parenthood of Canada 1961. The separate organizations of Jewish and Negro or Afro-Canadian women indicate both their discomfort in the predominantly Christian or white groups and their recognition that their particular concerns warranted separate organizations.

⁴³For example, as children, Madelaine Parent and Laura Sabia attended the same convent school in Montréal (Macpherson, *When in Doubt*, 153). Laura Sabia, founding president first of the Committee for Equality and then of NAC, was a neighbour of Judy La Marsh, the only woman in the Pearson cabinet when the demand for a Royal Commission on the Status of Women was presented. La Marsh and Sabia consulted regularly on strategies to get Cabinet to agree to the Commission. Later, Sabia's son married Pearson's granddaughter. Ursula Franklin, founder of the Voice of Women, was a professor at the University of Toronto.

⁴⁴Laura Sabia, a university educated women, was married to a doctor. She had paid domestic workers who helped run her household and she described how the enforced boredom of her life as an upper middle-class housewife led to her involvement in politics (Sabia interview, 14 January 1988, 43). In *When In Doubt, Do Both*, Kay Macpherson describes how middle-class wives of professional men got active in politics in the 1950s and 1960s in organizations such as the Association of Women Electors and the Voice of Women. Muriel Duckworth's biography makes the same point. Some of the quotes in the rest of the text come from interviews I conducted. Where that is the case, the name or if confidentiality was requested, an ID number, the date of the interview, and where available, the page number of the transcript, are cited in the text. Copies of the interviews are available on request. The interview with Laura Sabia was also conducted by Shelagh Wilkinson, Women's Studies, York University, Toronto on 14 January 1988.

⁴⁵Examples of such women include Réjane Colas who headed several Québec women's organizations and Thérèse Casgrain who had been a leader in the struggle for suffrage (won in 1940 about 20 years later than the rest of Canada). Micheline Dumont, Michèle Jean, Marie Lavigne, and Jennifer Stoddart, *Québec Women: A History*, translated by Roger Gannon and Rosalind Gill (Toronto 1987).

While most of these groups focused on particular issues at any one time, their overall project was to take apart the structures of discriminatory laws and exclusionary social practices which maintained women's inequality as compared to men. Their goal was to ensure for women the same rights and opportunities available to men. That formulation did not question the systemic inequalities between men, so class and race inequalities were rarely addressed. Groups such as the National Council of Jewish Women or the Canadian Negro Women's Association, formed specifically to address the concerns of racialized women, like Communist and Socialist groups addressing the issues of working-class and poor women, were the exception. Most of the large national women's groups had no serious critique of capitalism as a socio-political economic system based on the exploitation by the owners of wealth of working people whose labour produces that wealth. Rather, they wanted reforms that would enable women to compete like men in the labour market, in politics, and in society as a whole, for access to wealth, power, and other resources. They believed that by informing and educating politicians about the issues, they could convince them to introduce new policies to improve the situation of women. Thus, one of their main strategies for change was lobbying politicians and attempting to educate people about the issues to ensure wider support for their lobbying.⁴⁶

The national executives were also linked both to other national organizations and to comparable organizations internationally. One of the key links was provided by the United Nations' Status of Women Commission where women from different countries met to compare their situations, and from which they could pressure their governments to investigate and improve the situation of women. Many national organizations such as the NCWC, BPW, and the YWCA were part of international federations which had formal status as participants in UN agencies and members of their organizations served as Canadian representatives.⁴⁷ Laura Sabia, an activist in the Canadian Federation of University Women, said of her meetings in the late 1950s and early 1960s with women's delegations from various countries:

They were all doing the same damn thing. The question of abortion was in every country. That's why it became a very dominant question. Everybody was looking at it. And the property laws were all the same. They all had different kinds of property laws, but they all wanted something better than they were having. The women were not getting a fair deal. My knowledge first came from the United Nations.

⁴⁶The history of many of these groups remains to be written. Some important examples include: N.E.S. Griffiths, *The Splendid Vision: Centennial History of the National Council of Women of Canada, 1893-1993* (Ottawa 1993); Ethel Vineberg *The History of the National Council of Jewish Women of Canada* (Montréal 1967).

⁴⁷Some Canadian groups affiliated to international organizations such as The National Council of Women of Canada had observer status to the UN Commission from its inception. Canada officially became a member in 1958.

Their international experiences convinced many of these women of the universality of women's issues and of the importance of working co-operatively. They also meant that such women were strategically positioned to act quickly and effectively as catalysts for the newly re-emerging women's movement of the 1960s.

This "second wave" involved major political and cultural shifts in the way women understood themselves and their place in society. Existing women's groups grew and expanded their range of activities as new women joined. New organizations such as the BC Indian Homemakers' Association (formed in 1960), and new federations of groups such as the Fédération des femmes du Québec (formed in 1966) were established. Small radical activist groupings came together briefly over particular events or actions and hundreds of individual women began speaking out publicly.

In this climate, the leaders of the large national women's groups saw the possibility for new ways of organizing. In 1966, Laura Sabia, then president of the Canadian Federation of University Women, realized that most of the national women's organizations were lobbying the federal government about the same issues:

Everybody was writing briefs to the government in those days. We wanted poverty law, law reform on divorce ... abortion.... So every one of these organizations ... was sending briefs to the government. And there was a common thread.... We were all asking for the same damn thing.

She realized that by lobbying separately, they diffused their impact on the government and on each other: "Every year ... the government would receive women's organizations — one by one — separate so they didn't talk to each other."

Assuming that they would be more effective if they co-operated, she wrote to 35 national English-language organizations, inviting them to send representatives to a meeting in Toronto.⁴⁸ "So they all came to the meeting and we batted back and forth what to do and I showed them how all the resolutions were the same, we all wanted the same things and why don't we do it as a group?" They formed a coalition of 32 groups called the Committee for the Equality of Women in Canada (CEWC). Christine Bennett of the United Steelworkers of America was the first union representative on CEWC. She was replaced after a few months by Grace Hartman, as chair of the OFL women's committee, who then worked to persuade the organized labour movement to support CEWC.⁴⁹ The CLC voted to support CEWC and named

⁴⁸The meeting on 3 May 1966 was held at the University Women's Club on St. George Street in Toronto (where Sabia was a member). Fifty women representing 32 organizations attended. These included groups such as The National Council of Women, the YWCA, Business and Professional Women's Clubs, Zontas, Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire (IODE), The Federation of Women Teachers' Associations of Ontario, Voice of Women, and the Catholic Women's League.

⁴⁹Crean, *Grace Hartman*, 79.

Hartman as the CLC representative. CEWC also worked with Thérèse Casgrain, Monique Bégin, and others to forge links with Québec women's groups, particularly with the newly formed Fédération des Femmes du Québec. As the members of these groups clarified the basis for their collaboration, they decided to demand a Royal Commission on the Status of Women.⁵⁰

Formed in 1967, the Commission toured the country, holding public meetings and inviting written briefs. It acted as a catalyst, providing a focus for many women who mobilized their groups or formed new ones to make presentations. It also created a space for women in mixed organizations to push for attention to women's issues. Grace Hartman worked hard to ensure that both CUPE and the CLC made presentations to the Commission so that union women's issues were clearly on the agenda of both the (often reluctant) union federations and the Commission. According to Susan Crean, while the CLC submission was cautious, the three union women attending its presentation made sure in the question period that the Commissioners heard their more radical positions, especially on abortion. The CUPE presentation was more forthcoming about the reasons why union women were also involved in the autonomous women's movement:

We differ from other labour organizations which state that the labour movement is in the forefront of all organizations striving for equality of women. CUPE does not feel that the labour movement does enough to fight discrimination against working women.... The majority of female workers who fight for true equality do so without the wholehearted support of their fellow trade unionists, male and female.⁵¹

When the Commission filed its *Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women* in 1970, it provided a thoughtful and critical examination of the situation of women in Canada and made 167 recommendations. While the more conservative women thought the document went a bit too far and left-wing and women's liberation activists criticised it for not going far enough, most of the women who had participated considered the process a productive one. The challenge was to pressure the government to implement the Report's recommendations.

The member groups of the Committee for Equality for Women in Canada continued with their various activities including lobbying the federal government and monitoring its response to the Report but CEWC itself was inactive until Sabia called a meeting in 1971 where she urged member groups to remember that "only in joint action can we be sure that the Report will not gather dust on some Parliamentary shelf."⁵² CEWC decided to reform itself as The National Ad Hoc Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC) with the specific goal of ensuring

⁵⁰Cerise Morris, "'Determination and Thoroughness': The Movement for the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada," *Atlantis*, 5 (Spring 1980), 1-21.

⁵¹Crean, *Grace Hartman*, 83-84.

⁵²Canadian Women's Movement Archives, CEW papers, Correspondence, 6 January 1971.

the implementation of the Royal Commission's recommendations.⁵³ Frustrated by the lack of response, NAC organized a national conference in 1972 in Toronto called "Strategy for Change" to discuss how to get action on the recommendations of the Report. About 800 women attended.⁵⁴ Sabia recalls the power of bringing such a variety of women together:

It brought everybody together. It was just incredible. You had the prim ladies from the local Council of Women, the Councils of Women. You know, those women who legitimately did an awful lot of good work, but did it in the way the government wanted them to do it — nice manner, nice ladies. Then you had the other group who were the Trotskyites and who were just as bold as you could probably do ... they came and screamed and yelled and just did about everything.... They had never come across these women before.... So in essence, we all learned from each other.⁵⁵

The conference affirmed the importance of monitoring the federal government's treatment of women's issues and lobbying for further improvements and confirmed NAC as a national organization to serve "as an educational and communications link for women in Canada who are striving to improve their status and to change the traditional attitudes and habits of prejudice towards women." Intended to "not duplicate nor supersede established organization" NAC also reaffirmed the coalition structure as a way of ensuring that specific groups could continue to focus primarily on their own concerns while uniting to monitor and lobby government.⁵⁶ As President, Sabia repeatedly affirmed the importance of bringing together women from very different perspectives:⁵⁷

⁵³The group later dropped the *ad hoc* from its name.

⁵⁴The conference was held 7-9 April 1972. The groups attending included: Canadian Federation of Business and Professional Women; Canadian Federation of University Women; Canadian Home Economics Association; Canadian Union of Public Employees; Catholic Women's League of Canada; Federated Women's Institute of Canada; Federation of Labour (Ontario); Federation of Women Teachers Association of Ontario; National Chapter of Canada-IODE; National Council of Jewish Women; New Feminists; Toronto Women's Liberation Movement; YWCA; National Voice of Women; Single Parents' Association; the Association for the Repeal of the Abortion Law; and the Ontario Committee on the Status of Women. Many women attended as individuals. Many left-wing activists ignored it as "too reformist," a perception that was confirmed when some women from Trotskyist groups were prevented from speaking.

⁵⁵Interview with Laura Sabia, 14 January 1988, 60.

⁵⁶*Status of Women News*, (Summer 1973), cover.

⁵⁷She also worked hard to find on-going bases of unity even in the face of profound political disagreements. As an active Roman Catholic she tried to persuade the Catholic Women's League to remain in NAC after NAC took a position in support of women's rights to have abortions. She reports:

... but if you don't go after those women ... the ones who were so anti-establishment ... those are the women who worked, they're the ones who kicked the asses, and if you can't work with them, and the polite ones are polite and that's fine and it's great to have them on board, but we need the others too.⁵⁸

Despite Sabia's enthusiasm about learning from "everybody" and her willingness to work with both the conservative members from mainstream organizations and more radical grassroots women, the conference was severely criticized for its lack of militancy by a radical caucus formed by about 60 participants including activists such as labour militant Madelaine Parent and socialists from Toronto Women's Liberation.⁵⁹ One of the radical caucus members explained their concerns:

There was nothing wrong with the Royal Commission recommendations. We were prepared to support any call to have them implemented. But we wanted much more; we wanted the conference to come out loud and clear in support of way more radical positions, like an end to capitalism and for workers' control — not something those bourgeois ladies were prepared to discuss.⁶⁰

NAC's leadership and its subsequent positions, at least in the first few years, confirmed its position primarily as a voice for liberal feminism:⁶¹ "For the first few years of its existence, NAC's executive committee members tended to represent either the established women's groups or the growing number of Status of Women committees."⁶²

I was the Chairman and I had to say to them, "Well, everyone here wants us to keep on the issue of abortion. We've all voted on it. Now you are the only group that says no. Would you like to work with us on other subjects and we won't ask you for any other opinions on abortion?"

The Catholic Women's League left.

⁵⁸Interview with Laura Sabia, 14 January 1988, 23.

⁵⁹Macpherson, *When in Doubt*, 153; Vickers, Rankin, and Appelle, *Politics as if Women Mattered*, 74-75.

⁶⁰From an interview conducted in December 1999 with someone who had participated in the Strategies for Change conference. She has preferred to remain anonymous.

⁶¹The relationship between NAC and socialist feminism warrants further study. During the 1970s, some socialist feminists dismissed NAC as "liberal feminist" and reformist, and therefore chose not to work with NAC. For example, talking about lesbian efforts to be included in mainstream women's organizations in the early to mid 1970s, Ross ignores the Committee for Equality and NAC: "Unlike the BCFW (British Columbia Federation of Women) or the national Organization of Women in the United States, there was no centralized, broad-based feminist organization in Ontario within which Toronto lesbians might agitate for the inclusion of a lesbian platform." See Becki Ross, *The House That Jill Built: A Lesbian Nation in Formation* (Toronto 1995), 30. However, others decided to work in NAC to try to influence its politics.

⁶²Macpherson, *When in Doubt*, 156.

The existence of NAC as an increasingly large and highly visible organization since then has been both a strength and a problem for the women's movement in Canada. While its organizational form and lobbying tactics have kept feminist concerns on the national political agenda, its visibility has encouraged some commentators, especially in the media, to erroneously equate it with the women's movement as if its organizational positions are shared by its member groups (which they often are not) and as if it includes the whole of the women's movement (which it never has). This assumption in turn leads to the claim that the women's movement was largely middle class and concerned primarily with state reform. As a result, the rest of the women's movement, and particularly its working-class and left-wing, are often ignored. Instead, the argument is made that the agenda of the women's movement demands an expansion of the social welfare system and greater government receptivity to women's issues.⁶³ Liberal feminism does have that strategy; for left-wing feminism it is only a tactic. Of course demands must be made of the state but real change will only come from the mass mobilization of women challenging capital.⁶⁴

Despite NAC's predominantly middle-class reformist leadership in the first decade, and especially the strong representation of federal Liberal women, the organization included both the original radical caucus and groups of union and working-class women.⁶⁵ Key individual union activists such as Madelaine Parent and Laurel Ritchie, from the Canadian Confederation of Unions, held prominent positions in NAC and so ensured union issues were always on the agenda. Grace Hartman was treasurer for its first three years. NAC's coalition politics meant it remained committed to alliances with unions and working-class feminists. Quite deliberately, as a signal that it was open to working-class and union issues, in 1974, NAC chose as its second president Grace Hartman, at that time the Secretary-Treasurer of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE):

She (Grace Hartman) came from Labour and it was a good thing to have a woman in Labour take on that kind of thing because some of the women in the Labour movement were very suspicious of those of us who were not part of the labour movement or those of us who lived 'rich on the hog', so to speak. you know, that's what they thought, we were these ladies that really didn't know anything about the labour force. So we sort of planned that Grace Hartman would be the Chairman and she was a good chairman.⁶⁶

The impact of union women on NAC's policies was reflected in the organization's 1974 opposition to wage and price controls, despite the strong presence of Liberal party members. Union women's involvement in NAC gave the organization access to resources that few other women's groups could offer. The Federation of

⁶³ Brodie, *Politics on the Margins, Restructuring and the Women's Movement*, 44.

⁶⁴ Adamson, Briskin, and McPhail, *Feminist Organizing for Change*.

⁶⁵ Vickers, Rankin, and Appelle, *Politics as if Women Mattered*, 85.

⁶⁶ Interview with Laura Sabia, 14 January 1988, 57.

Women Teachers' Associations of Ontario for example, provided office space, support, and handled publicity and public relations for NAC for years.⁶⁷ Union locals and federations have been members; individuals periodically serve as union representatives on the executive and important union issues such as pay and employment equity, health and safety concerns, and basic union concerns such as the right to strike, typically won NAC support. As NAC took up such issues, it gained a qualified legitimacy from more radical women, especially those coming out of the women's liberation movement and socialist feminists:

As socialist feminists we support the goal of working together for changes in our lives and in society and we have been active in NAC for a number of years.... We also understand that sexism, racism, hetosexism (sic) and class oppression are very much integrated, and maintained, by the economic and political structures under which we live. The lives of working-class women, women of colour, immigrant women and lesbians are affected by all of these oppressions, and our analysis and methods of work must reflect this.⁶⁸

NAC's membership increased from the original 31 groups in 1972, to 120 groups in 1977, to 458 groups in 1986 of which 36 were from the labour movement.⁶⁹ In 1996 there were over 600 member groups. The presence of working-class and union women acted to remind everyone that winning rights for elite women does little to advance women's equality generally. Kay Macpherson, then Vice President of NAC, quoted approvingly Grace Hartman who said:

I often think of a woman standing on the cold hard cement of a fish packing plant, ankle deep in slime, working eight hours a day for poverty-level wages, and of women in "bucket shop" factories, large and small offices, banks, restaurants and hundreds of other places of work where unions have either been unable or have not tried to organize. What is more important to these women: the fact that a woman is head of Statistics Canada, or that they are fighting to have free child care provided by the employer?⁷⁰

This alliance kept union issues on the agenda for other women's organizations and strengthened union women's ability to carry feminist politics back to their unions. It also insured that a class analysis was presented in NAC debates:

Leftist-feminist ideas were also reflected in the News [The NAC newsletter]. The struggles by unionists such as Grace Hartman and Madelaine Parent to win collective-bargaining objectives for working-class women were reported throughout the period [1972-1978]. Class aspects of issues such as abortion were highlighted.⁷¹

⁶⁷ Macpherson, *When in Doubt*, 155.

⁶⁸ IWD, "Editorial," *International Women's Day Newsletter*, (Toronto May 1986), 3.

⁶⁹ Vickers, Rankin, and Appelle, *Politics as if Women Mattered*, 77, 162.

⁷⁰ Kay Macpherson, "Doing It Ourselves," *Canadian Forum* (September 1975), 41.

⁷¹ Vickers, Rankin, and Appelle, *Politics as if Women Mattered*, 77.

A sensitivity to class and a commitment to reducing class inequalities remained central to NAC's positions. Its 1992 *Review of the Situation of Women in Canada*:

... shows that the lives of most women are getting more difficult, while at the same time more barriers protect a smaller number of women who have access to increasing proportions of the wealth ... the goal of feminism was never to create situation (sic) where a privileged few women have the freedom to have it all when the majority of women are falling further towards poverty.⁷²

The development of working-class feminism and the strength of socialist feminism in the wider women's movement were also fueled by the particular way the women's liberation movement and socialist feminist politics evolved in Canada. Reciprocally, the growth of that left-wing feminism was fueled by the strength of working-class feminism in the unions and in the autonomous women's movement.

*The Women's Liberation Movement, Socialist Feminism,
and Working-class Women*

During the 1960s, a wave of radical political protest swept much of Europe and North America. Inspired by the revolutionary, democratic, anti-imperialist movements, and struggles for national liberation and socialism in much of Latin America, Africa, and Asia, it demanded liberation — freedom from oppression — and developed critiques of the systems of power, institutions, and agents that oppressed. Central to it was an analysis of the United States both as an imperialist war-mongering power internationally, particularly in Vietnam, and as a society based on racism. Protest movements coalesced around the anti-racist civil rights movement and later the Black Power movement in the United States, the international peace movement fighting the militarism of the Cold War, and especially the threat of nuclear war. They also led to the rise of the New Left with its reworking of the older left-wing communist politics, and an international student and youth movement challenging existing social conventions and morality. All these movements challenged prevailing formal knowledge through a rediscovery of Marxism, communist history, and a focus on the oppressed peoples of the world. Women activists applied their critique of oppression and their vision of liberation to their own situations and developed the women's liberation movement as part of the second wave of the women's movement.⁷³

In Canada, the women's liberation movement developed in the context of the growth of the New Left and particularly a new alliance of the populist social democratic, federal political party, the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) with the unions in the New Democratic Party. Canadian radical protest movements were also specifically influenced by a Canadian nationalist movement

⁷²Alice de Wolff, *Review of the Situation of Women in Canada* (Toronto 1992), 1-2.

⁷³Sheila Rowbotham, *Women, Resistance and Revolution* (London 1972).

opposed to American domination of Canada which, fuelled by the anti-Vietnam war protests, developed a critique of imperialism and sometimes, a larger critique of capitalism.⁷⁴ The women's liberation movement was also tied to the important political protests in the 1960s generated by the rise of native rights organizations, the 1963 formation of the Front de libération du Québec demanding political and economic independence and self-determination for Québec, and the activism of anti-poverty groups demanding redistribution of wealth.⁷⁵ All of these movements questioned the legitimacy of capitalism and, in calling for social transformation, created a (limited) receptivity to socialist politics within the radical protest movements. "Canadian women more uniformly developed an analysis of their oppression based on a class notion of society.... The marxist perspective has since been central to the development of the Canadian women's liberation movement."⁷⁶

Canadian socialist politics were dominated neither by the trade unions nor by the Communist Party as in Britain or Europe,⁷⁷ nor marginalized and demonized as in the United States.⁷⁸ Instead, a place for a modest form of socialism in the mainstream of Canadian politics was carved out by the existence of the New Democratic Party, a federal political party formed from an alliance of the older Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) and the organized labour movement. The CCF, with its base in rural agricultural communities and populist workers' and farmers' co-operatives, had a tradition of communal democracy and hostility to big business, especially the banks. Farm women's organizations and women in rural communities had played central roles in the CCF since its founding in 1920. Some of that support for populist movements, coalitions, and women's equality was retained in the early years of the NDP. More generally, extra-parliamentary socialist politics retained a degree of legitimacy that proved important to the development of socialist feminist currents in the women's movement.

The New Left emerged in organizations such as the Student Union for Peace Action (SUPA), the Company of Young Canadians (CYC), later in the Waffle, a left-wing caucus eventually expelled from the NDP, and various Marxist and Leninist organizations associated with international Trotskyist, Maoist, and anar-

⁷⁴ Although Canadian nationalism and its critique of American imperialism was widespread in English Canada, it was much harder to advance a critique of imperialism generally, and specifically of English Canadian imperialism in relation to Québec and aboriginal peoples. Support from English Canadians for Québec and aboriginal anti-imperialist struggles for self-determination was hard to mobilize.

⁷⁵ Vern Harper, *Following the Red Path: The Native People's Caravan* (Toronto 1979); Myrna Kostash, *Long Way from Home: The Story of the Sixties Generation in Canada* (Toronto 1980).

⁷⁶ Corrective Collective # 6, *Women Unite!* (Toronto 1972), 10.

⁷⁷ Sheila Rowbotham, "Introduction: Mapping the Women's Movement," in Monica Threlfall, ed., *Mapping the Women's Movement* (London 1996), 7.

⁷⁸ Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Ann Snitow eds., *The Feminist Memoir Project: Voices from Women's Liberation* (New York 1998).

chist movements such as Red Morning, Rising Up Angry, The International Socialists, and The Revolutionary Marxist Group.⁷⁹ The growth of these left-wing Marxist-Leninist communist and socialist organizations, while always numerically small, offered a sophisticated political analysis and energetic political organizers and militants in most cities. A significant number of key women activists developed their political analysis of socialism and women's liberation and learned their organizing skills in New Left groups. They took those lessons into the unions and the autonomous women's movement. In fact, many of the key organizers of the 1996 Women's March had been activists in New Left organizations 20 years previously.⁸⁰

The women's liberation movement that emerged from this particular political conjuncture, in the late 1960s, was on the one hand part of a widespread, international movement with shared critiques, similar strategies, and common visions. On the other hand, organizationally it tended to appear as tiny local groups that came together for a period of time after which the members dispersed to other groups. Sheila Rowbotham describes the political orientation common to women's liberation internationally:

The early women's liberation movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s rejected those approaches to emancipation associated with the liberal project of modernizing capitalism and with state socialism, both of which sought simply to bring women into the public sphere on equal terms with men without regard for domestic life. They were also critical of welfare reformism which took the existing sexual division of labour for granted. They aimed instead to transform social relationships as a whole at work and at home. Though radical feminists emphasized male domination (or patriarchy) as the key, and socialist feminists believed that oppressive relations of race and class were equally important, they shared a utopian faith in the possibility of changing individuals and society.⁸¹

Women's liberation groups sprang up in many places across the country. As a movement, it encompassed a number of different currents, especially radical feminism, lesbian feminism, and marxist or socialist feminism. Its activists formed women's caucuses in New Left and other protest groups. They set up consciousness raising groups, study circles, and published newsletters and journals as part of a process of developing an analysis of women's oppression and strategies for winning liberation.

⁷⁹Kostash, *Long Way from Home*.

⁸⁰One of the reviewers of this paper asked for specific examples. I was involved in many of the activities and organizations discussed in this paper so can name a range of such women. However, I do not have their permission to do so and unless they have explicitly identified themselves in print I am unwilling to "out" them. Thinking through this issue made me realize how little of the early women's liberation movement, left-wing, and socialist movement history of this period is actually in print. More historical work needs to be done.

⁸¹Rowbotham, "Introduction" in Thelfall, ed., *Mapping the Women's Movement*, 13.

Less concerned about developing enduring organizations and institutional forms, they relied on informal networks between individuals and small groups. They were quick to public action on specific issues, organizing demonstrations, street theatre, and other ways of making their politics known.⁸² They also set up collectives to provide services to women and strengthen the public face of the women's liberation movement. Often these were also intended to prefigure new liberatory ways of organizing society. Communal and co-operative housing efforts, worker co-ops such as bookstores and community centres attempted to develop alternative structures to oppressive sexual, marital and familial relations, and to exploitative capitalist businesses. Parent and worker run co-operative day care centres experimented in ways of raising children more collectively.⁸³ The Canadian Women's Educational Press began publishing in 1972 as an explicitly socialist feminist publishing house to provide materials rejected by mainstream publishers.⁸⁴ Women's liberation activists set up shelters for women recovering from men's violence and participated in building a national reproductive rights movement that was eventually at least able to decriminalize abortion and make access to birth control and abortion more available.

Local organizing efforts frequently generated heated disputes and splits based on their differences, but a strong socialist feminist politic developed that continues to shape the women's movement.⁸⁵ Central to that politic was a class analysis that understood the struggle "for the liberation of women as part of the liberation of all human beings", or as Rosemary Brown put it: "Until all of us have made it, none of us have made it."⁸⁶

That orientation encouraged socialist feminists to concentrate their organizing initiatives on issues that concerned the majority of women — jobs and decent working conditions, pay equity, child care, access to birth control and abortion, and an end to forced sterilizations. Where NAC focused on lobbying the government to improve women's situation through federal legislation and policy initiatives, most

⁸² Adamson, Briskin, and McPhail, *Feminist Organizing for Change*, 42-61; Ross, *The House that Jill Built*, 23-40.

⁸³ Meg Luxton and Heather Jon Maroney "Begetting Babies, Raising Children: The Politics of Parenting," in Jos Roberts and Jesse Vorst eds., *The Crisis in Socialist Theory, Strategy and Practice* (Winnipeg 1992), 161-198.

⁸⁴ Corrective Collective # 6, *Women Unite!*

⁸⁵ Carolyn Egan, Linda Lee Gardner, and Judy Vashti Persaud, "The Politics of Transformation: Struggles with Race, Class, and Sexuality in the March 8th Coalition," in Frank Cunningham, Sue Findlay, Marlene Kadar, Alan Lennon, and Ed Silva, eds., *Social Movements, Social Change The Politics and Practice of Organizing* (Toronto 1988), 20-47; Charmie Guetell, *Marxism and Feminism* (Toronto 1974); Hamilton and Barrett, eds., *The Politics of Diversity*; Heather Jon Maroney and Meg Luxton, eds., *Feminism and Political Economy: Women's Work, Women's Struggles* (Toronto 1987).

⁸⁶ First quote is by Rowbotham; *Women, Resistance and Revolution*, 11; Brown, *Being Brown*.

socialist feminist initiatives assumed the state was both capitalist and patriarchal and therefore hostile to women's concerns. Strategically, socialist feminism aimed to enable and empower women to act on their own behalf politically, rather than relying on leaders.⁸⁷ Seeking to build coalitions that would generate mass, militant actions such as demonstrations, rallies, and public meetings, specific socialist feminist groups tried to ally not only with other feminists and with anti-racist and lesbian and gay activists, but also with other organizations such as anti-imperialist solidarity groups and aboriginal groups. As unions constituted the largest organized group of working-class women, and as some of the key activists of the women's liberation movement were also active in the unions, the labour movement was an obvious ally.

Such interactions forged links of understanding between working-class women and other activists in the women's movement. In Ontario for example, a whole range of strikes in the late 1970s and early 1980s, where women workers and women's issues were central — Fleck, Radio Shack, Fotomat, Irwin Toy, Bell Canada, and Blue Cross — brought union women into the women's movement and reminded the rest of the women's movement about the importance of working-class feminism. Just as the Fleck strike had played an important part in developing feminist consciousness among the strikers, in turn, some of the women's liberation activists who had joined the Fleck strikers on the line had their commitment to a socialist politics reaffirmed. A member of a Toronto socialist feminist Fleck support group described her appreciation of the strikers:

Those women were amazing. I learned so much walking with them — their courage, their strength, were so inspiring. They are mostly immigrants, they struggle with English, they face racism every day and they work in the most appalling conditions imaginable for shitty pay. They reminded me that our struggle is absolutely worth it. If even just one employer can get away with treating workers like this, then all employers will be tempted. The only way we can win liberation for women is by fighting with women like these Fleck women.⁸⁸

Such ties were mobilized effectively during the 1984-1985 Eatons strike. In an effort to get a first contract, employees at six stores in Ontario went out on strike in November 1984. The CLC called for a boycott of Eatons; NAC immediately supported it. After two organizers from the Retail and Wholesale Department Store Union (RWDSU) attended an OWW conference in early 1985, union women and women's liberation activists formed a Women's Strike Support Coalition which met regularly throughout the rest of the strike, organizing strike support carol singers during the Christmas season, special women's pickets, and a fund-raising concert. The striking Eatons' workers were cheered when they spoke at the Toronto International Women's Day rally on 9 March 1985 and the march itself detoured

⁸⁷IWD, "Editorial," *International Women's Day Newsletter*, (Toronto May 1986), 3.

⁸⁸Interview #17, 15 February 1980.

through the flagship store at the Eatons' Centre, plastering "Boycott Eatons" throughout the store. The striking women and the women organizers from RWDSU were clear that the support from the women's movement was very important in helping them stick out the long strike through the winter. The next year, the Women's Committee of the Labour Council of Metropolitan Toronto held a labour breakfast to celebrate IWD.⁸⁹

Conclusions

Alliances between liberal feminists, women's liberation activists, union feminists, and working-class women have never been easy. Such moments of unity and mutual support as the Fleck strike are infrequent and the tensions between the various segments of the women's movement are frequent and painful. The homophobia and conservatism of aspects of working-class feminism were revealed for example in 1979 during the organizing for International Women's Day (IWD) in Toronto when Organized Working Women proposed that abortion and lesbian issues be dropped for fear of offending and alienating union women.⁹⁰ Several years later, however, when Bell Workers were on strike, Toronto IWD marchers, many of whom had previously done solidarity picketing, carried small bells to symbolize the strike and the march included the Bell office in its demonstration. A Bell worker at the IWD rally was shocked at the presence of lesbians who were also demanding support for their issues, in particular, custody rights for lesbian mothers. She was taken to task by her co-striker who explained that as "they've supported us on our line; so we support them on theirs."⁹¹

In her discussion of women auto workers, Sugiman notes that, while some auto workers became women's liberation activists, the majority "... moved carefully and somewhat ambivalently between conventional womanhood, patriarchal unionism, and a working-class feminism or feminist unionism."⁹² The same could probably be said for many working-class union women. However, because the working-class feminism they developed was able to find spaces in the political configuration of the women's movement, it helped to keep a space for a more radical socialist feminism which continues to play a key role in the contemporary women's movement. The 1996 Women's March was no anomaly; it was a logical outcome of 30 years of coalition politics in which women in the labour movement and socialist feminists worked long and hard to forge an alliance with each other and with the rest of the autonomous women's movement, that kept working-class

⁸⁹Egan, Gardner, and Persaud, "The Politics of Transformation," 30-31.

⁹⁰Nadja, "Women's Liberation" *RWL/LOR Pan Canadian Pre Convention Discussion Paper*, 2 (April 1979), 12.

⁹¹Personal field notes, International Women's Day. Heather Jon Maroney reports a similar conversation between Fleck workers about alliances with lesbians at another IWD (Maroney, "Feminism at Work," 97).

⁹²Sugiman, *Labour's Dilemma*, 202.

women's issues and left-wing politics alive even in an era of neo-liberal attacks and misogynist backlash.⁹³

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⁹³Four years later, as they celebrated the start of the International Women's March 2000, at the May 2000 NAC annual general meeting, out-going NAC President, Joan Grant-Cummings, declared: "NAC would not have survived without the feminists in the labour movement." Nancy Riche, Vice-President of the CLC, replied: "The labour movement is part of NAC."