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# ***THE 1907 BELL TELEPHONE STRIKE: Organizing Women Workers \****

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In February of 1907 a dramatic strike of women workers took place in Toronto when over 400 operators walked off their jobs with Bell Telephone. For days, the dispute between Bell and the "hello girls" captured front page headlines in the Toronto newspapers. The determination and militancy of the "pretty young girls in their tailor mades"<sup>1</sup> in the face of Bell's intransigence created great public interest and aroused considerable sympathy. The threat of a crippled phone service raised the issue of strikes in monopoly controlled public utilities, an issue fresh in the public mind after a violent street railway strike in Hamilton only a few months earlier. As in Hamilton, public sympathy clearly lay with the strikers, since the monopoly controlled utility was highly unpopular with the local citizenry.

The Bell strike was seen as an event of great importance by government and business leaders. Rodolphe Lemieux, the federal Minister of Labour, publicly pointed to the Bell Commission as a testing ground for the Industrial Disputes Investigation Act, legislation which provided for a cooling off period and public investigation in utilities strikes. Privately, he declared that the Bell strike "marked the turning point of our future legislation."<sup>2</sup> The Company also saw the strike as an event of some significance. Bell later claimed that the strike "brought an important new step in our labour relations thinking."<sup>3</sup> The operators' firm resistance to Bell's wage cutbacks and effi-

\* I would like to thank Irving Abella and Ian Radforth for their valuable comments and criticisms of this paper.

<sup>1</sup> *Toronto World*, 8 February 1907.

<sup>2</sup> King Papers, A. Lemieux to W.L. Mackenzie King, 15 February 1907.

<sup>3</sup> G. Parsons, "A History of Labour Relations in Bell", unpublished manuscript, 1963, Bell Canada Historical Collection, (hereafter BCHC).

ciency drive fostered the company's increasing awareness of the need for more refined scientific management and stimulated the introduction of consultation and welfare measures designed to enhance employee loyalty and diffuse unionization attempts.

As well as providing some insight into the mind of government and business, the strike furnishes an excellent picture of the working conditions, problems and attitudes of women telephone workers. Unfortunately, the strike did not mark a significant achievement for the operators because they failed to obtain their wage demands, failed to gain significant changes in their working conditions, and failed to form a union. Nonetheless, the strike was characterized by a militance and solidarity which contradicted the contemporary dictums about women's passivity and revealed the possibilities of protest against their exploitation.

## I

By the turn of the century, operating had become a totally "female" occupation at Bell Telephone. After an experiment with women labour on both day and night shifts in 1888, the Bell had decided to switch from boy to women operators. Boys were found to lack tact and patience; unlike women, they were seldom polite and submissive to irate or rude subscribers but "matched insult for insult."<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, Bell said, boys were "hard to discipline"<sup>5</sup> and were not as conscientious and patient as women. Taking these qualities into account, as well as the important consideration that "the prevailing wage rates for women were lower",<sup>6</sup> Bell hired only female operators by 1900.

Bell demanded that their operators be physically fit in order to tackle the exacting work at the switchboard. Applicants had to be tall enough to reach the top wires, had to prove good hearing and eyesight, and could not wear eyeglasses or have a consumptive cough. Supervisors were instructed not to issue an application unless satisfied that the person was in "good health and physically well qualified."<sup>7</sup> An applicant was also requested to produce references, one from her clergyman, stating that she was "of good moral character and industrious habits... a person of truth and integrity, with intelligence, temperament and manners fit to be an operator."<sup>8</sup> With such qualifications Bell hoped to attract a "better class" of woman worker than was found in industrial employment. Early recruitment attempts stressed the occupation's white collar characteristics: the clean work place, "steadiness, possibility of advancement, shorter hours than factory work, and seclusion

<sup>4</sup> Boy operators file, BCHC.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Early operators file, BCHC.

<sup>7</sup> Circular to Supervisors re Hiring, Early Operators file, BCHC.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

from the public."<sup>9</sup> The job specifications probably did result in a "better class" of employee. One early operator explained that she came to the Bell "while I was waiting for an appointment as a school teacher", while another commented that she became an operator because "few lines of work were open to women and these were not appealing, such as sales clerks."<sup>10</sup> Note was carefully taken of the "enunciation, education and penmanship"<sup>11</sup> of all applicants. This undoubtedly eliminated many immigrants and women with no formal education.

The Royal Commission revealed, however, that the operators' working conditions did not necessarily reflect their position as a "better class" of wage earner. In fact, the operator's shift work, close supervision, and ties to machinery made her job resemble blue collar, rather than white collar, work.<sup>12</sup> The operator's task was extremely exhausting for great mental concentration, accuracy and speed were essential. Each woman looked after 80 to 100 lines, with 6,041 possible connections and placed about 300 calls an hour. Backless stools and a high switchboard, which some women could reach only by jumping up on the stool rungs, made the operators' work physically uncomfortable and tiring. If her own calls lagged, a worker was not allowed to relax, but had to help the operator next to her. In order to create a "business-like" atmosphere, the rules were strict: the women were instructed to line up five minutes before their shift entered the operating room, and when seated, had to "sit up straight, with no talking or smiling."<sup>13</sup> Supervisors who paced behind the operators inspecting their work were told to "nag and hurry the girls."<sup>14</sup>

Other strains were added to the operator's rapidly paced work, such as the risk of physical injury and the knowledge that a monitor might be secretly listening in to check one's performance. Operators complained to the Commission that heavy headgear could produce painful sores and that women sometimes fainted and occasionally became hysterical from the pressure of rapid work. Maude Orton, a supervisor and leader in the strike, claimed that women sometimes were pushed to nervous breakdowns, and that she was compelled to take nerve medicine. "I never knew what nerves meant until I started to work at the Bell",<sup>15</sup> she commented. The most dangerous work was on the long distance lines, where operators sometimes received severe electrical shocks, which could send them into convulsions and lay them off work for weeks.

<sup>9</sup> Newspaper clipping, Early Operators file, BCHC.

<sup>10</sup> Early Operators file, BCHC.

<sup>11</sup> Circular to Supervisors, BCHC.

<sup>12</sup> See John Schacht, "Toward Industrial Unionism: Bell Telephone Workers and Company Unions, 1919-1937", *Labor History*, 16 (Winter 1975), p. 10.

<sup>13</sup> *Toronto Star*, 11 February 1907.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 12 February 1907.

For such demanding work, the women received a starting salary of \$18 a month, which after three years service was increased to \$25. Although this wage compared favourably with the hourly rate of many female factory workers, it fell below the monthly wage of the more skilled woman worker in industry, who could earn about \$30 a month, (and of course, it fell far below the male, skilled wage rate of \$40-\$60 a month).<sup>16</sup> The immediate issue precipitating the 1907 strike, however, was not inadequate wages: the issue was an increase in hours. On 27 January, the Manager of the Toronto Central Exchange, K.J. Dunstan, informed the operators that, as of 1 February, their five hour day would be lengthened to eight hours, and their salaries increased. Introduced originally in 1903, when noisy construction work made an eight hour day at the switchboard impossible, the five hour day was continued on as an experiment and then was "permanently" adopted in 1905 since management believed it to be a more efficient use of womanpower.

In late 1906, however, Dunstan became worried about the efficiency of the five hour day. At the same time, the Company decided to standardize the operators' hours of work in Toronto and Montreal, which still had an eight hour day. In this period the policy of Bell Telephone President Charles Sise was to "eliminate all Bell's remaining competitors; to above all, give a better quality of service while keeping rates as low as possible."<sup>17</sup> Also at this time, American scientific management practices were adopted by some firms in Canada.<sup>18</sup> With the aims of increasing efficiency and raising productivity, programs such as cost and time studies, bonus systems, and job standardization were introduced into industrial establishments. Bell Canada, especially with its close branch-plant relationship to American Telephone and Telegraph, was influenced by these currents of thought. In late 1906, two expert engineers from AT&T were called in to make comparative studies of the Montreal and Toronto operating systems. In true scientific management style, the engineers performed stopwatch tests on the operators' responses, examined the quality of their answers, and from these calculated the speed and quality of operating.

Their reports agreed that the eight hour system more efficiently used labour power, but their findings were not a conclusive indictment of the five hour system, for one report called for "further investigation" and the other

<sup>16</sup> Bureau of Labour Report, Ontario *Sessional Papers*, No. 30, 1907, pp. 100-113, 150-167. For example, the weekly wage of a female typographer was about \$12, boot and shoe worker \$8, and furrier \$7. In the same occupations male wages would be about \$14, \$14, and \$15.

<sup>17</sup> R.C. Fetherstonough, *Charles Fleetford Sise* (Montreal 1944), p. 180.

<sup>18</sup> See Craig Heron and Bryan D. Palmer, "Through the Prism of the Strike: Industrial Confront in Southern Ontario, 1901-14", *Canadian Historical Review*, LVIII (December 1977). Heron and Palmer see the 1907 strike as an outcome of a managerial drive for efficiency, but this was only one factor behind the operators' protest. Other complaints, such as wage cutbacks, were crucial to the strike.

stressed the different personalities of the Office Managers in influencing the speed of operating.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, a decision was made to introduce an eight hour day in Toronto when a new exchange was completed in the summer. In January of 1907, however, Dunstan urged an immediate changeover because he knew that the self-supporting operators were becoming increasingly angry about their low wages. It was essential to raise the wages, he informed Sise, "and advisable that the increase in hours and wages coincide."<sup>20</sup>

Dunstan argued publicly that the changes were necessitated by Bell's inability to secure operators, "for our rates were too low and to attract more women we had to increase wages, therefore we had to increase hours."<sup>21</sup> He also contended that the change was made for the sake of the operators' health. "It is the pace that kills",<sup>22</sup> he later told the Commission. The Company's primary motive, however, was to reduce the "uneconomical" overtime being paid and to give increased service while keeping labour costs down. Company correspondence brought before the Commission revealed that the new schedule was designed to "ensure the increase in wages would not equal that of hours and the cost per 1,000 calls should thus be lessened."<sup>23</sup>

The operators quickly realized that wages would not increase in relation to hours worked since the new schedule meant a reduction from approximately 21¢ to 16¢ an hour. For those operators who were entirely self supporting, the salary changes were particularly disastrous. These women had previously worked extra five-hour shifts in order to pay for their board and clothing. Under the new system, such overtime would be impossible: their income would be drastically reduced. A small group of women, composed of supervisors and the more experienced operators, began to organize a protest against the new hours. With the help of Jimmy Simpson, a Toronto printer, and well known activist in trade union and socialist circles, they formed the Telephone Operators, Supervisors and Monitors Association, and they engaged a lawyer, J. Walter Curry, to help them draft a petition of protest. Curry, a former crown attorney with strong Liberal connections, was active in the public ownership league formed in Toronto in February of 1907. He donated his services to the operators free of charge, eager to aid in the fight against the Bell monopoly, and with the help of W.F. Maclean, editor of the *Toronto World*, started a public strike fund for the women.

Bell refused to meet with Curry or with the group of protestors whom Dunstan dubbed "a few firebrands and agitators stirring up trouble."<sup>24</sup> On 29

<sup>19</sup> *Report of the Royal Commission on a Dispute respecting terms of Employment between Bell Telephone Company of Canada and Operators at Toronto*, (Ottawa 1907), p. 13-14. (hereafter, *Report*).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>21</sup> Dunstan in *Report*, p. 28.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>24</sup> *Toronto Star*, 30 January 1907.

January, 400 operators met at the Labour Temple to discuss their predicament. We have had grievances before, declared one operator, but never such good organization to back us up: "while it is the extension of hours we complain principally about now, it's the money too."<sup>25</sup> Faced by intransigent Company officials who were unwilling to discuss the issue, the meeting voted to plan a strike. This vote had immediate results. Fearing disruption of telephone service, Mayor Coatsworth wired the federal government for assistance. Mackenzie King, then Deputy Minister of Labour, hurried to Toronto, hoping to display his talents as a mediator. Bell, however, resolutely refused such "outside interference", and secretly made plans to bring in strikebreakers. Bell's head office in Montreal encouraged Dunstan's firm approach. Company President Charles Sise advised Dunstan to be "resolute... act with absolute firmness in rejecting consultation or compromise."<sup>26</sup> Not surprisingly, it was Bell that precipitated the crisis. On 31 January, the Company demanded that operators either sign an acceptance of the new schedule or resign. The operators had no choice but to walk out; in a sense the confrontation was a lock-out, not a strike.

That night, the women met again at the Labour Temple. The meeting, said the *Star*, "was militant and enthusiastic."<sup>27</sup> The women made an impressive show of solidarity and sisterhood. Strikers who lived at home contributed money for those independent women who had to make rent payments. Supervisors, monitors and operators, all with different rank and salaries, joined together to protest the Company's actions. Despite their higher salaries and positions of authority, the supervisors seemed to feel considerable concern for the operators' working conditions; perhaps these more experienced workers felt protective towards the younger women. The strikers were addressed by J. Lightbound, from the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), who suggested that they affiliate with the union. The feeling of the strikers, reported the press, was strongly in favour of the idea.

Public sympathy bolstered the strikers' enthusiasm. Bell's monopoly made the Company unpopular with Toronto citizens, who objected to the lack of competition and the arbitrary methods of fixing rates.<sup>28</sup> Shortly after the women had walked out, a crowd gathered at the Central Exchange and cheered on the strikers, while snowballing scabs entering the building and hooting at Dunstan when he came out to address the crowd. The Company also had to ask for police protection for its strikebreakers, who were brought from Bell exchanges in Peterborough, Kingston, Ottawa and Montreal. (The Montreal operators were promised an expense-paid trip and were given a \$20

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> G. Parsons, "A History of Labour Relations in Bell", BCHC.

<sup>27</sup> *Toronto Star*, 1 February 1907.

<sup>28</sup> See Canada, House of Commons, *Select Committee on Telephone Systems* (Ottawa 1905), vol. 1, p. 701-7.

honorarium when they returned home.) The first day of the strike, the scabs were taunted by the picketers at the Exchange door. "I hope you die of nervous prostration",<sup>29</sup> shouted one irate striker. Some of the Montreal strikebreakers had to be removed from their hotel when bellboys objected to their presence; other scabs complained of harassment over the telephone as they worked.

All the Toronto daily papers were sympathetic to the operators. A *Globe* editorial heartily endorsed the strike, criticizing Bell's selfish and inhumane treatment of its women workers. The Company, however, was not censured for its use of strikebreakers, but rather for its neglect of the operators' health and mental well-being. In the York County Council a unanimous resolution was passed condemning Bell for its neglect of their employees' health; the Company was described as "inhuman, a menace to business . . . and should not be tolerated in a free Canada."<sup>30</sup> On Sunday, 3 February, Reverend J.E. Starr, a local Methodist minister, held a church service for the strikers. His sermon, taken from St. Paul's words "I entreat thee also yoke fellow, help those women", condemned Bell's "tyranny over the weaker sex" and called for a more humane employment system which would not "strain women beyond their capacity and impair the interests of the unborn."<sup>31</sup>

Yet, despite such public sympathy, the strikers gained no ground. Moralistic sermons and editorials were not backed up with laws compelling Bell to negotiate with the strikers, nor were the women even unionized. The only real weapon the women had in the dispute was the withdrawal of their labour power and that weapon had been quickly nullified by the use of strikebreakers. The Bell management was determined to avoid setting the precedent of discussing and negotiating working conditions with their employees: they were adamantly opposed to any semblance of collective bargaining. Charles Sise had made his ideological opposition to unions clear during a dispute with Hamilton linemen in 1900. In 1907 that opposition remained. Sise informed the Montreal press of his firm intention to lock out the women: "so far as we are concerned, the strike is over. The Company has all the new operators it requires."<sup>32</sup> Dunstan echoed this opinion, telling the Toronto newspapers that he might consider "on an individual basis only, any operator who wished to return to work on the eight hour schedule."<sup>33</sup>

The Company did make some attempt to counter its unfavourable public image. In his interviews with the press, Dunstan stressed three arguments. First, he emphasized that the Company's most important concern was its obligation to the community, justifying the use of strikebreakers by professing that Bell was interested only in continuing its service to the public. Secondly,

<sup>29</sup> *Toronto News*, 1 February 1907.

<sup>30</sup> *Globe* (Toronto), 2 February 1907.

<sup>31</sup> *Toronto Star*, 4 February 1907.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 31 January 1907.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 2 February 1907.



Dunstan tried to prove that the strike was led by a few agitators and troublemakers, while the "majority would welcome the change and return to work."<sup>24</sup> Lastly, he claimed that compared to other women wage earners, operators were well off, and he pointed to the various "comforts" of the Toronto Exchange, such as restrooms and lockers, which were not found in most industrial establishments.<sup>25</sup> Bell's public relations efforts, however, did not include an offer to negotiate with the strikers. At a meeting on 31 January, the strikers had voted to accept an arbitrated settlement, believing that their cause was just. But Bell refused arbitration because the Company anticipated that an arbitration board would rule against them.

Faced with this deadlock, Mackenzie King adopted a new tactic, advising the operators to request a public enquiry from the Minister of Labour. The operators were persuaded by their male advisors to return to work and accept the eight hour day until the Commission made its recommendations. Although hesitant to end the strike with no concrete gains, the strike committee decided to place their hopes for redress in an inquiry. The operators' male advisors encouraged them to view the Commission with optimism. "I believe you will win", assured Curry, "for you have the public and the newspapers behind you."<sup>26</sup> The operators, reported one newspaper, were "jubilant, for they felt victory would emerge from the Commission;" enthusiastic cheering erupted when Simpson called for "No victory to the Company."<sup>27</sup>

The Commission, however, was clearly not a solution to the operators' plight for the Company later refused to be bound by its recommendations. The strikers had now suffered a dangerous set back; they returned to work on the Company's conditions, with no promise of negotiations on the issue of wages and working conditions. It is possible that King and Curry hoped public pressure would reverse Bell's decision and force concessions. On the other hand, there is abundant evidence that King's main aim in persuading the women to return to work was simply to bring peace and diffuse the conflict. There was quiet recognition by some trade unionists that the tactic of striking before unionization had been disastrous and that the strike was being crushed by the use of strikebreakers.<sup>28</sup> It is possible, therefore, that the women's advisors, foreseeing defeat, believed that the operators should regain their jobs as soon as possible. "They have fooled us", one disappointed operator realized, "we thought they couldn't get along for an hour without us, but they can."<sup>29</sup>

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 1 February 1907.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 30 January 1907. Dunstan was later corrected by a striker who pointed out that the "comforts he speaks of are largely paid for out of our salaries." *Toronto Star*, 8 February 1907.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 2 February 1907.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Toronto News*, 9 February 1907; *Toronto Star*, 16 February 1907.

<sup>29</sup> *Toronto News*, 1 February 1907.

## II

On 4 February, the operators returned to the Exchange to offer themselves for re-employment. President Sise had informed Dunstan in a letter that "under no conditions should we take back an operator. Our strong point will be to show our utter independence of the disaffected operators."<sup>40</sup> Yet, in a few days about 150 women were taken back, and after two weeks of Commission hearings, the Company announced it would make a concession and rehire all its former employees at their former salaries.

The Royal Commissioners were Mackenzie King and Judge John Winchester, a York county judge of Liberal persuasion, with a record of sympathy on labour issues.<sup>41</sup> The sessions were well attended and thoroughly covered by the press. The operators, many of them still unemployed, were present in large numbers, and every newspaper commented on "the beauty show adorning the courtroom."<sup>42</sup> Reporters described the attractive array of millinery and dress at the enquiry, always distinguishing between the operators and the "men carrying on the serious business of the strike."<sup>43</sup> Some of the women, however, did manage to rise above their Dresden doll image: the committee of operators who initiated the strike advised their lawyer, Curry, throughout the proceedings, while other operators found themselves threatened with eviction from the courtroom when they interrupted Dunstan's testimony with loud protests.

The Commission hearings concentrated on five main issues: the change in hours, the causes of the strike, the nature of the operators' work, medical opinion about the operators' workload, and lastly, the "listening board" issue which had come to light during the strike.

Bell's public image plummeted even further during the hearings. It was soon made clear that the Company had made its changes in hours for commercial and business reasons only, despite previous assertions to the contrary. Also, Dunstan had claimed before the Commission that Bell's new schedule would decrease the work load of each woman, but the evidence proved otherwise. All those operators who had been re-employed under the eight hour schedule testified that there was no reduction in load: "the promised relief hasn't come; we are working just as hard."<sup>44</sup> The hearings further embarrassed Bell by revealing that the Company had recently considered abolishing the workers' two week paid vacation and that officials were aware that the operators' wages were inadequate. At first, Dunstan implied that

<sup>40</sup> Sise to Dunstan, Labour Trouble file, BCHC.

<sup>41</sup> Winchester chaired the Royal Commission on employment of aliens on Canadian railways in 1904. He sided with the workers and made scathing criticisms of the C.P.R. See Donald Avery, "Canadian Immigration Policy and the 'Foreign' Navvy 1896-1914", Canadian Historical Association, *Historical Papers* (1972), p. 143.

<sup>42</sup> *Toronto Star*, 5 February 1907.

<sup>43</sup> *Mail and Empire*, (Toronto), 5 February 1907.

<sup>44</sup> *Toronto Star*, 9 February 1907.

many women came to Bell simply to earn "pin money", or that they spent their wages unwisely: "some women", declared Dunstan, "come to us just to earn a fur coat or something like that and leave to get married after two or three years."<sup>46</sup> But boarding house rates were presented and self-supporting operators testified that without overtime they could not survive. Rent and food prices had escalated far beyond the reach of independent operators working only a five hour day. The \$18 a month received by a starting operator was quickly eaten up by board costs of about \$12-14 and food costs of at least \$4; overtime was necessary even to obtain the other essentials such as clothing, car fare and laundry.<sup>46</sup> After these presentations, Dunstan conceded that for the 30-40% of the operators who were self supporting, their normal wages were inadequate. Bell was also forced to admit to the arbitrary manner in which it had informed its employees of its intentions at the time of the schedule changes. Curry skillfully emphasized this testimony, trying to portray Bell as a monstrosly rich and ruthless exploiter, a monopoly mercilessly grinding down its employees. He demanded to know why wages were not influenced by Bell's ever-rising profits. Horrified, Bell's Chief Office Manager, Frank Maw, replied that wages most certainly should not rise with profits: "after all, you pay the market price for your goods."<sup>47</sup>

The Commissioners were especially concerned with the mental and physical hazards of telephone work. Testimony showed that operating was so rapidly paced and pressured that it resulted in unusually high nervous strain and mental exhaustion. Supervisors testified that they were told to pressure the operators to quicken their pace: "I know that the girls are worked to the limit, but we are told to drive them."<sup>48</sup> Dunstan claimed that the five hour day allowed many women to moonlight at jobs, such as housekeeping, while Maw argued that women came to work "already exhausted"<sup>48</sup> from roller skating, one of the operators' favourite pastimes. The strike leaders, however, vehemently denied these claims. After a day's work at the Bell, said Maude Orton, women could not moonlight anywhere: "they are only fit for bed."<sup>50</sup> The pressure of work, Miss Dixon continued, "doesn't allow young girls to enjoy themselves as they should, at roller skating or anything else."<sup>51</sup> Evidence also revealed that women often had to work extra relief periods for

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 5 February 1907.

<sup>46</sup> One independent operator estimated that one-third of her salary had to come from overtime work. Operators' board costs ranged from \$2.50 to \$3.50 a week. Food costs were estimated from dividing family budgets presented in the *Tribune*, 17 March 1906 and Department of Labour, *Board of Inquiry into the Costs of Living*, 1900-1915.

<sup>47</sup> *Report*, p. 35.

<sup>48</sup> *Mail and Empire*, 12 February 1907.

<sup>48</sup> *Toronto Star*, 7 February 1907.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 12 February 1907.

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

which they were never paid; extracting this free overtime labour was regular Company policy. The most disturbing testimony, however, came from the long distance operators who had suffered electrical shocks. One operator told the hearing that she was not informed about shocks when she took the job and in such an accident had lost the use of her left ear. Another woman who had suffered a severe shock and convulsion informed the Commission that she was still too terrified to return to work.

The Commission subpoenaed twenty-six Toronto doctors in order to obtain an objective view of the operators' conditions of work. All the medical experts agreed that the task of operating put exceptional strain on a woman's senses of hearing, sight and speech, and that the result was "exhaustion, more mental and nervous than physical."<sup>82</sup> A consensus of medical opinion (with the exception of the Company doctor) rejected the eight hour day. Most doctors suggested a five, six or seven hour day with assured periods of relief. One helpful doctor observed that the weaker sex should not engage in such work at all: choosing between a five and eight hour day, he said, was like deciding "between slaying a man with a gun or a club."<sup>83</sup> The testimony of these medical experts reflected prevailing medical and social views of woman as the "weaker" sex. Young women, it was emphasized, were extremely susceptible to nervous and emotional disorders; "we are laying the basis of our future insane asylums with operating,"<sup>84</sup> warned one doctor. Many doctors concurred with King's suggestion that women deserved the special protection of the state on matters regarding health and sanitary conditions in their place of work. One doctor added that it should definitely be medical experts who decided for the working woman: "they must be protected from themselves . . . the girls are not the best judges of how much work they should do."<sup>85</sup>

One other issue was investigated by the Commission. When the strike first began, some operators had mentioned the existence of a listening board which could be used secretly to intercept a subscriber's conversation. Despite Bell's assurances that the listening board was only used to investigate technical problems, the press and public were not satisfied. For a time the striking operators were all but forgotten by the press which denounced Bell for the irresponsible and arrogant use of its monopoly. "The public had been repaid for the inconvenience of the strike", said the *Globe*, "by gaining the important knowledge of listening boards . . . the opportunity for misuse is there."<sup>86</sup> Despite such fears, however, the hearings did not reveal that the opportunity had been taken. The newspapers' concentration on the listening board issue revealed how easily the operators could be forgotten. Many editorials and

<sup>82</sup> *Report*, p. 60.

<sup>83</sup> *Toronto World*, 15 February 1907.

<sup>84</sup> *Toronto Star*, 15 February 1907.

<sup>85</sup> *Report*, p. 76.

<sup>86</sup> *Globe*, 5 February 1907.

letters to the editor pointed to the strike as one more reason for nationalization of telephones and telegraphs. While disgust was expressed about the mistreatment of the operators, these proponents of public ownership were eager to use *any* argument, including threats to privacy and Bell's high rates, in order to buttress their case for public ownership.

On 18 February, the Commission came to an abrupt end. The Company's lawyers put forward a compromise solution which Curry and the operators accepted. A new schedule was proposed in which the operators were to work seven hours, spread over a nine hour day. Extensive relief was to be given, with no consecutive period of work extending over two hours. Wages were to be those proposed under the eight hour schedule, and a promise of no compulsory overtime was given. The operators were dubious about the offer, but decided in its favour after a conference with Curry and King. The women expressed fears that the load would not be reduced and announced that the "seven hour day was less injurious, but there was still too much strain."<sup>57</sup> Curry and King undoubtedly knew that the proposal favoured Bell, but at the same time believed that it was as much as Bell would surrender. It must have been clear that the Company was largely unmoved by the condemning testimony of the hearings and by adverse public feeling. Bell officials realized that it was unlikely that special legislation would be introduced to enact such a short (five hour) working day. They also knew that adverse public opinion would fade and that as a powerful monopoly, the Company could withstand a great deal of adverse public feeling anyway. A letter sent to King almost two months after the settlement made it only too clear that the operators were the losers. Curry informed King that:

I learn from the young ladies that matters are not much improved from what they were before, that the only improvements are in the surroundings, not in the work itself.<sup>58</sup>

The seven hour schedule had not lessened the work load and had only reduced the amount of the wage cutback. The "compromise" agreement did little to solve the dilemma of the self-supporting operator. How was she now to pay for board and clothing when her wages still did not approximate her former five hours plus overtime salary?

### III

Throughout the strike and the hearings Bell maintained a consistent attitude towards its women workers. First, the Company insisted on complete control of its own labour policy; it was unwilling to give its employees any role in determining their working conditions and it abhorred government intervention. Secondly, Bell made extensive use of the largely unorganized,

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 19 February 1907.

<sup>58</sup> Curry to King, 3 April 1907, Strikes and Lockouts file, Department of Labour Records.

highly fluid female working force as a form of cheap labour and excused its low wages with the argument that women were not breadwinners, but were only working for "pin money" while awaiting marriage. This was the practice of many business concerns, but Bell's case seems particularly reprehensible, for as a stable company with rising profits and dividends, Bell clearly did not need to make wage cutbacks. Thirdly, Bell's claims that their employees' health was an absolute priority was pure rhetoric. Instead of establishing a work load compatible with the women's health, Bell sought to push them "almost to the breaking point."<sup>59</sup> The Commission's Report concluded that "one looks in vain for any reference which would indicate that the health or well being of the operators was a matter of any consideration."<sup>60</sup>

In a 1963 report on Bell's labour policy prepared for the Company, G. Parsons concluded that some important lessons had been learned from the 1907 dispute. The Company had decided that, as a monopoly, Bell was subject to closer scrutiny and thus must be more aware of "good grievances"<sup>61</sup>; if ignored, these grievances would be likely to gain a public hearing and would perhaps attract government intervention. In the pre-war period in the United States, Bell increasingly sought employee loyalty by developing employee associations which were to give some feeling of consultation and negotiation, by pioneering an employee benefit plan, and by making offices more pleasant workplaces (supplying lounges and cafeterias).<sup>62</sup> In Canada similar consultation and welfare programs were gradually introduced. After the strike, for instance, the Company decided that attempts would be made to "foster better communications"<sup>63</sup> with their employees, keeping them more closely informed of the Company's plans and making some pretence of consultation. Secondly, the office surroundings were improved; in the Main Exchange a matron was hired to bring the operators tea and coffee. A few months after the strike, Sise decided to supply a free medical examination for every operator. He privately informed the Hamilton Manager that such examinations "may be desirable to save us trouble and expense inasmuch as we will avoid the training of useless operators who might be discharged because of unfitness."<sup>64</sup> Five years later, Bell introduced a Health Benefit plan to aid its employees in time of illness. These welfare measures were part of the broader scientific management program to increase efficiency and consolidate management control. By playing the benevolent paternalist, the Company aimed to minimize dissatisfaction over wages, raise the prestige of the occupation, and discourage unioni-

<sup>59</sup> Report, p. 96.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> G. Parsons, "A History of Labour Relations in Bell", BCHC.

<sup>62</sup> John Schacht, "Towards Industrial Unionism: Bell Telephone Workers and Company Unions, 1919-37", p. 13.

<sup>63</sup> G. Parsons, "A History of Labour Relations in Bell", BCHC.

<sup>64</sup> Sise to Hamilton Manager, Early Operators file, BCHC.

zation. The 1907 strike was one impetus to the development of this welfare capitalist approach.

The strike not only acted as a mirror for Bell's labour policy: it also revealed Mackenzie King's approach to labour relations. King's view of women workers, of the governmental role in labour disputes, and his hopes for the Industrial Disputes Investigation Act were all exhibited in the hearings and the Commission Report. King's perceptions of the operators reflects a Victorian image of woman. As one of the latest commentators on King's personal "woman problem" has stated:

the image of woman in Christian society has revolved around the contrasting conceptions of Eve the Temptress and the Virgin Mary... at no time was this paradox more acute than in the Victorian age from whence King came.<sup>65</sup>

King believed it was essential that a woman's maternal role be protected, not just for her own good but for the good of society as well. Thus, in the Report he worried about the results of the nervous strain of operating upon a woman's future role: "the effects moreover upon posterity occasioned by the undermining or weakening the female constitution cannot receive too serious consideration."<sup>66</sup> Women, however, could also be seen as Eves. In the hearings King interrogated Bell rigorously about its treatment of self-supporting operators: his concern was that the Company's wage rates were inadequate to supply board in a "decent" home and thus women would be forced to turn to prostitution. It was King's first concern which predominated in his Report. He expressed both privately and publicly his horror with the Company's disregard for women's health. In his diary he wrote:

the more I go into the evidence the more astounded I am at the revelations it unfolds. The image is constantly before me of some hideous octopus feeding upon the life blood of young women and girls.<sup>67</sup>

King's paternalism was revealed throughout the hearings and Report. Because women workers were weak and "easily led", he later remarked, "to seek to protect this class is noble and worthy to the highest degree."<sup>68</sup> As woman's nature is particularly sensitive to physical and mental strain, he warned, her industrial working conditions must be regulated by medical experts and the benevolent state.

This view reflected a broader social attitude towards female labour often expressed by middle class reformers. Doctors testifying before the Commission shared King's concern for future mothers. Their greatest fear was that nervous strain would disqualify a woman from motherhood: "they [the

<sup>65</sup> R. Whitaker, "Mackenzie King in the Dominion of the Dead". *Canadian Forum*, LV (February 1976), p. 9.

<sup>66</sup> *Report*, p. 95.

<sup>67</sup> King diary, 4 August 1907.

<sup>68</sup> Canada, Parliament, Report of a Royal Commission into Cotton Factories. *Sessional Paper No. 39, 1909*, p. 11.

operators] turned out badly in their domestic relations, they break down nervously and have nervous children; it is a loss to the community."<sup>69</sup> The press also criticized Bell primarily for its disregard for women's health; the use of strikebreakers, the payment of low wages, and the need for unionization were not considered the important issues. It was the moral, rather than economic, question of woman labour which was emphasized. As Alice Klein and Wayne Roberts have suggested, the impetus for middle class reformers often came from fears that the femininity of woman workers was endangered by their working conditions.<sup>70</sup>

In order to ensure protection for women workers, King advocated cautious government intervention in industrial disputes. Later in *Industry and Humanity*, he claimed to be particularly concerned with public utilities where an absolute or quasi-monopoly existed. In such situations, he said, "there exists an insistence on the part of the public of a due regard for the welfare of employees."<sup>71</sup> It is also clear, however, that King did not see the government's role as the primary or controlling factor in labour-capital relations: the government would intervene to legislate protective guidelines only if all other reform attempts failed. In the Bell Report, King cited the need for protective legislation for women but he also pointed out the difficulty in securing it: "it is difficult to see wherein it is possible for the State to effectively regulate the speed of operating."<sup>72</sup> He concluded that the real hope for change lay in another area, namely a more enlightened attitude on the part of the Company. This attitude was to be the outcome of an impartial investigation, the pressure of public opinion, and the Company's own desire for efficiency.

King used the Bell dispute in his arguments for his Industrial Disputes Investigation Act (IDIA) which was presented for second reading in Parliament during the Commission hearings. Both King and Lemieux tried to use the Bell dispute as a public testing ground for the IDIA principle and both cited it as an example for the success of that principle. The IDIA provided for a public investigation of all labour disputes in public utilities and a thirty day prohibition of strikes or lockouts during the investigation. Although neither labour nor capital was legally obliged to accept the investigator's findings, King argued that the "pressure of public enquiry would force concessions and

<sup>69</sup> Canada, Parliament, Department of Labour, Report of the Deputy Minister, *Sessional Paper* No. 36, 1908, p. 129.

<sup>70</sup> Alice Klein and Wayne Roberts, "Besieged Innocence: the 'Problem' and Problems of Working Women, Toronto, 1896-1914", in *Women at Work* (Toronto 1974), pp. 212, 213, 226.

<sup>71</sup> Canada, Parliament, Department of Labour, Report of the Deputy Minister, *Sessional Paper* No. 36, p. 121. See also W.L.M. King, *Industry and Humanity*, (Toronto 1973), pp. 205-207.

<sup>72</sup> *Report*, p. 98.



a settlement."<sup>73</sup> After the IDIA was presented for its second reading on 13 February, Lemieux informed King that:

I am very anxious to succeed re the telephone enquiry, . . . by all means settle the telephone strike *cum summa laude* [sic]. It marks the turning point of our future legislation.<sup>74</sup> page 128

In the Commons Lemieux argued that the Bell Commission provided an excellent example of an impartial commission and public pressure bringing compromise to a labour conflict. "Due to the thorough scientific enquiry of the Commission", said Lemieux, "the Company has already compromised on its earlier policy, and agreed to re-hire its former operators."<sup>75</sup> King used similar arguments to support the IDIA after the Bell inquiry was over. He maintained that a neutral inquiry and public opinion had been instrumental in bringing a settlement to the dispute. Writing to a Member of Parliament, King said,

Take the case of the telephone girls in Toronto. What power had those girls, unorganized and unassisted, with no means of keeping up a strike. . . . When public opinion was brought to bear on the situation for the first time there was an approach to an equality between the parties.<sup>76</sup>

It is true that the investigation helped to end the dispute. The public hearings had brought some minor concessions from Bell for the Company agreed to reduce the amount of wage cutbacks and rehire all the strikers. (It is hard to imagine, however, that Bell could have continued indefinitely with out-of-town strikebreakers.) If peace was King's major objective, then perhaps the IDIA principle could be termed a "success". In his diary, King did optimistically claim that he thought the Report would "mean a gain for workingmen and women."<sup>77</sup> Yet, it is clear that his most important goal was immediate peace and *not* the kind of settlement the women received. Throughout the Report, King pointed to Bell's insensitivity and to public opinion and to "its motives of business cupidity above all else."<sup>78</sup> How then could King have hoped for the Company's enlightenment and reform? The contradiction between King's condemnation of Bell's greed and inhumanity and his hopes for its reform seems incredible.

Furthermore, King never replied to Curry's statement that the operators' working conditions had not improved; his willingness to ignore this letter seriously questions his expressed concern for the plight of the working woman. His delay in publishing the Report also makes his concern for the operators suspect. In early April the operators and Curry pleaded with King to move as quickly as possible. "I had hoped", wrote Curry "to have attempted

<sup>73</sup> Canada, Department of Labour, *Annual Report*, 1908, p. 60.

<sup>74</sup> King Papers, Lemieux to King, 15 February 1907.

<sup>75</sup> Canada, House of Commons, *Debates*, 14 February 1907, p. 3009.

<sup>76</sup> King papers, Memo re. Bill 36, undated, and M.P. Unnamed.

<sup>77</sup> King diary, 11 September 1907.

<sup>78</sup> *Report*, p. 96.

to get legislation here before the rising of the House [on 20 April]. It would seem to be almost impossible now to accomplish that purpose."<sup>79</sup> King replied that there was some "advantage in delaying the report a little for it has given the Company a chance to show what it can do."<sup>80</sup> The only advantage was to Bell, for when the Report appeared six months after the strike, public interest had waned and over half the operators had left the Company.

The Bell dispute did not prove the value to labour of the IDIA principle, but rather its dangers. The operators placed their hopes in redress through public investigation; yet, Bell had been powerful enough to maintain wage cutbacks and arduous working conditions despite adverse public feeling. Public investigation, sympathetic editorials, and church sermons did not help the operators secure their demands. Better organization and an effective strike might have.

#### IV

The issue of unionization was not central to the 1907 strike. After the strike had commenced the operators passed two resolutions favouring an arrangement of affiliation with the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), yet these plans did not materialize. The operators waited until 1918 when another major attempt to organize into the IBEW was initiated.<sup>81</sup> The failure to sustain a union after the strike in 1907 was the result of three factors: the hostility of Bell, the disinterest of the IBEW and other male labour leaders, and the particular problems encountered by the workers because they were women.

Bell's policy with regard to trade unions was clearly stated by Sise in 1900: "we have never recognized these unions in any way nor would we oblige ourselves to employ only union men."<sup>82</sup> This attitude remained firm in the 1907 dispute. Bell refused to re-hire any of the strike leaders or picketers after the strike was over on 4 February. Even after the "amnesty" for strikers

<sup>79</sup> Curry to King, 3 April 1907, Strikes and Lockouts file, Department of Labour Records.

<sup>80</sup> King to Curry, 4 April 1907, Strikes and Lockouts file, Department of Labour Records. Allan Studholme, Labour M.P.P. for Hamilton East, had suggested that a bill limiting the telephone operators to a five hour day be introduced into the provincial legislature. The bill was never introduced.

<sup>81</sup> In August, 1918 the Toronto operators demanded a wage increase and organized into a local of the IBEW. After a Board of Arbitration sided with the operators, wage increases were given and Bell agreed to meet with operators from the union. After two years, however, the union's influence dwindled and in 1920 it was reported that "the union of telephone girls has decreased to two score" (*Globe*, 11 April 1920). The problems of 1907 reappeared: company hostility, disinterest of IBEW officers and lack of commitment by the operators. G. Parsons also notes that Company welfare measures made the International less attractive. By 1921 the union was replaced by a company union, the Telephone Operators Association.

<sup>82</sup> Sise, quoted in G. Parsons, "A History of Labour Relations in Bell Telephone", BCHC.

which the Company announced on 13 February, women connected with the IBEW were asked to leave the union or resign from their jobs. Such anti-union victimization was obviously a major factor in discouraging unionization. The Company's movement towards welfare capitalism and its attempts to "kill unionization with kindness" may have also successfully sidetracked the organization of the operators.

At the 4 February meeting of the operators a male labour leader admitted to a *Mail and Empire* reporter that "it was the general consensus of opinion that the girls have been beaten . . . it is too bad the way they were led into their present position by men without a stake in the contest."<sup>83</sup> Because the women were not unionized before going on strike, he said, the Company had every advantage and the strikers no hope of sustaining a campaign of organization. It is questionable, however, how eager the IBEW was to organize the women. The IBEW had recently asserted its jurisdiction over telephone operators but the union was showing little interest in organizing them. The IBEW had developed a strong tradition of inequality; in the U.S., for instance, the few operators' locals existing before World War I were denied full autonomy and were given only half their voting rights. The Brotherhood, its historians agree, was convinced that women made "bad" union members; it believed operators could not build permanent unions as "women were flighty and came to the union only when in trouble, then dropped out."<sup>84</sup> Behind these convictions lay other fears. The electricians claimed that unskilled operators might make foolish decisions on craft matters which they did not understand. There was also strong apprehension about "petticoat rule":<sup>85</sup> the large number of operators, it was feared, would come to control the union. It is also possible that there was indifference to the operators simply because they did not threaten the earning power of other IBEW members. For all these reasons, the union Executive most often refused requests to lend any aid to the organization of telephone operators. Such hostility was probably an important factor in the failure of the Toronto IBEW to sustain a campaign of organization.

The IBEW's hesitancy to organize women workers reflected a broader view of woman labour held by many trade unionists at this time. At the 1907 Trades and Labour Congress convention, the issue of unionizing the operators was not discussed, although a resolution was passed calling for protective legislation for women telephone workers. One of the TLC's expressed aims at this time was "to abolish . . . female labour in all branches of industrial life."<sup>86</sup> The views of many craft unionists were dominated by their

<sup>83</sup> *Mail and Empire*, 4 February 1907.

<sup>84</sup> Jack Barbush, *Unions and Telephones: The Story of the Communication Workers of America* (New York 1952), p. 3. See also M. Mulcarie, *The IBEW: A Study in Trade Union Structure and Function* (Washington 1923), p. 131.

<sup>85</sup> Jack Barbush, *Unions and Telephones*, p. 4.

<sup>86</sup> Trades and Labour Congress of Canada, *Platform of Principles*, 1907.

belief that woman's role was primarily a maternal and domestic one. Apprehension about female strikebreaking and undercutting wages fostered and buttressed rationalizations about woman's role as wife and mother. "The general consequence of [AFL] union attitudes toward women", concludes Alice Kessler Harris, "was to isolate them from the male work force."<sup>87</sup>

This thesis also seems relevant to the Canadian labour scene, as illustrated in the Ontario labour press. In the *Industrial Banner*, a London labour paper published by the Labour Educational Association, the telephone strike was not discussed. Some clues to the failure of male trade unionists to accept the need to unionize women workers are provided in the *Banner*, and in two earlier Toronto labour papers, the *Toiler* and *Tribune*.<sup>88</sup> Male craft unionists were concerned with protection and equality for women workers: decent working conditions and equal wages were always upheld as worthy aims.<sup>89</sup> But it was woman's contribution to the home, rather than her status as a worker, which was most often stressed in the labour press. In fact, concern that woman's wage labour would destroy the family was very strong.<sup>90</sup> Woman's contribution to the union movement, it was often maintained, could be made through her role as wife, mother and manager of the family budget: she was to support the union label campaign and educate the family to union ideals.<sup>91</sup> In the eyes of male trade unionists women were hardly delicate and decorative appendages to be shunted to the sidelines of the class struggle, but their stay in the workforce was not a desirable thing, and was to be temporary, only an interlude before marriage and maternity. Thus, it was understandable that although some labour leaders momentarily encouraged the operators to organize, they were hesitant to follow up with the necessary further support. Their rather ambivalent attitude — of sometimes supporting female workers' rights, but usually emphasizing the home as woman's vocation — in fact discouraged the unionization of women. Stressing the maternal image, male trade unionists isolated women from the mainstream of the trade union movement and buttressed the employers' excuses for women's lower wages.

Reinforcing the hostility of Bell and the ambivalence of organized labour, were the situations and the attitudes of the operators themselves. The great majority of operators were single women, about 17 to 24 years old, who stayed less than three years with Bell. Most women left to marry, although some were promoted to clerical jobs in Bell, went on to other operating jobs, or returned home to aid their mothers. Occasionally, women were forced

<sup>87</sup> Alice Kessler-Harris, "Where are the Organized Women Workers?", *Feminist Studies*, 3 (Fall 1975), p. 98.

<sup>88</sup> The *Toiler*, an organ of the Toronto District Labour Council, was published from 1902 to 1904. The *Tribune*, edited by J.H. Perry, was published from 1905 to 1906.

<sup>89</sup> See *Industrial Banner*, July 1907; *Toiler*, 16 October 1903.

<sup>90</sup> See *Toiler*, 16 May 1902; 1 July 1904.

<sup>91</sup> See *Industrial Banner*, April 1908; January 1909.

temporarily to bolster family finances due to sickness or unemployment and when family circumstances no longer required extra aid, they gladly quit. This great fluidity of female labour obviously militated against successful unionization. By the time King's Report was published in September 1907, half of the operators employed at the time of the strike had left, including the former President and Secretary of the Telephone Operators Association. With personnel in perpetual motion, it was difficult to sustain educational and organizational work needed for effective unionization.

Despite the rapid turnover of operators, the physical setting of the Telephone exchange did aid worker solidarity and organization. As Wayne Roberts has pointed out, many women workers at this time were concentrated in trades such as garment making and domestic service, which were highly decentralized and divided the workers from one another. Operating, however, did not present such communication barriers; in fact, the militancy and solidarity of the Bell workers were in part a result of a physical setting conducive to organization. On the other hand, Bell women were not protected by craft skills or effective organization. Thus, strikebreakers from outside the city or inside the exchange could easily replace the Toronto operators. The technology of the switchboard allowed continued service, if only with half the usual work force. Naturally, the nature of the Bell monopoly also worked against the women for despite reduced service, Bell faced no loss of customers.

Another factor which may have handicapped effective unionization was the prevailing conception of woman's domestic and maternal vocation. Women workers like the Bell operators undoubtedly perceived their problems quite differently from the middle-class reformers who feared for the "working girl of delicate moral and physical viability, her womanliness endangered".<sup>92</sup> In the 1907 strike, the immediate issues of wages and hours, not their endangered maternity, were the concerns of the operators. Yet, while working women may not have assumed the decorative role imposed upon many Victorian middle-class women, or perceived wage labour as threatening to their femininity, they probably did accept the Victorian sentimentalization of the home and family.<sup>93</sup>

During this period women's columns in the *Tribune* and *Toiler* show some of the same ambivalence towards female labour as did male trade unionists. In the *Tribune*, May Darwin's column for women called for women's social freedom, equal pay, and the unionization of female workers. Yet, later in the *Tribune*, as well as in the *Toiler*, the women's section was

<sup>92</sup> Alice Klein and Wayne Roberts, "Besieged Innocence: The "Problem" and Problems of Working Women, Toronto, 1896-1914", p. 251.

<sup>93</sup> For similar conclusions about British working class women see for example, Peter Stearns in Martha Vicinus (ed.), *Suffer and be Still* (Bloomington 1972), p. 112 and Dorothy Thompson, "Women in 19th Century Radical Politics", in J. Mitchell and A. Oakley (eds.), *The Rights and Wrongs of Women* (London 1976), p. 138.

concerned with personal improvement and domestic issues, or, "recipes and fashions". Even feminist May Darwin stressed that women's contribution to the labour movement could best be made by buying union label goods, supporting her trade unionist husband, and educating her young to union ideas.<sup>94</sup> Such activities may have aided the development of women's trade union and working-class consciousness, but they still defined women's contribution in family-centred terms. This suggests that for many women workers such as the Bell operators, the family ideal was of considerable importance (although admittedly the working class conception of the family may have differed considerably from the prevailing middle class one). For the many Bell operators who "left to marry" such social values could not have aided the difficult process of unionization. The operators were part of a rapidly changing group of young women workers, who constituted a small minority of the female population: "they were isolated politically and socially . . . from their elder sisters, all of whom had returned to the home on marriage."<sup>95</sup> Their brief experience in the workforce preceding marriage "meant that they were deprived of a continuity of experience that might have allowed them to come to grips with the political economy of their experience."<sup>96</sup> The idealization of women's maternal and domestic roles must have dulled the development of a truly feminist working-class consciousness which recognized women's special oppression as workers. The tendency to define women in terms of husband, children and home obscured a reality where women were also individual workers, sometimes breadwinners, needing adequate wages, job security, and unionization just like male workers.

## V

The prevailing views on woman's maternal and domestic role were not, of course, the sole or primary causes for the operators' defeat in 1907. The Bell operators were severely handicapped by factors which impeded successful strikes and unionization for many male workers at this time. Most importantly, they were unskilled and lacked union protection; thus, their protest was easily and severely damaged by the importation of strikebreakers. Their cause was also injured when they were strongly encouraged to accept the bad tactic of abandoning their walkout and returning to work on the Company's terms, placing their hopes in a Royal Commission. The Commission was a dead end. Despite King's strong criticism of Bell, he could hide behind the qualification that labour legislation was primarily a provincial jurisdiction. The Report came too late for such legislation, which probably would have been difficult to obtain anyway. Six months after the strike, public concern had waned and

<sup>94</sup> *Tribune*, 11 November 1905.

<sup>95</sup> Wayne Roberts, *Honest Womanhood: Feminism, Femininity and Class Consciousness Among Toronto Working Women 1893 to 1914* (Toronto 1976), p. 11.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

the workforce at Bell had drastically changed; half the operators employed in September had not even experienced the strike. Unfortunately for the operators, the 1907 dispute came after the peak of public feeling for public ownership of telephones in Toronto: the Laurier government had already made clear its opposition to nationalization.<sup>97</sup> Thus, as a testing ground for the IDIA, the strike had revealed the dangers of this legislation to labour's interests, dangers which later provoked calls for the IDIA's repeal. The "mythical neutrality"<sup>98</sup> of King's IDIA was revealed in full: the main advantage of the principle of public investigation went to the Company.

For Bell, the strike was not without lessons. The Company's attempt to streamline its service and to increase efficiency, while reducing wages, had not been accomplished without a major labour conflict. Bell had learned the necessity of refining its techniques of scientific management, of tempering its management control with negotiation and welfare measures designed to increase employee loyalty, to enhance the occupation's prestige, and to diffuse the desire to unionize. Bell's combination of benevolent paternalism and blatant victimization of union members was effective in delaying unionization for many years.

Faced with the hostility of the Company, the ambivalence of organized labour, and the difficult realities of their working situation, it is not surprising that the Bell operators did not make impressive gains. Despite these barriers, the operators effectively formed a strike committee, lobbied for change within the Company, then carried through a strike with impressive solidarity. "No surrender to the Company" was the enthusiastic and unanimous watchword of the strikers. The militancy of their protest contradicted the idea of passive femininity and indicated the potential for women workers' opposition to their economic exploitation.

<sup>97</sup> In 1905 agitation for more public control of telephones was appeased with the Parliamentary Select Committee to investigate telephone systems. After eight volumes of testimony, the Commission reported it was "impossible to come to any conclusions." William Mulock, who had voiced sympathy for public ownership, retired as Postmaster General and was replaced by Allan Aylesworth who had acted as counsel for Bell. The *World* and *The News* reported that Mulock had been driven out by Bell, which had already established close political relations with the Laurier cabinet. Sise had been reassured during the Committee's hearings that the government had no intention of public ownership. See J.E. Williams, "Labor Relations in the Telephone Industry: A comparison of the Private and Public Segments", unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1961, pp. 83-85.

<sup>98</sup> R. Whitaker, "Mackenzie King in the Dominion of the Dead," p. 153.