

## The Interchangeable Worker and Fighting Back: Identifying Some Strategic Issues

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Résumé de l'article

L'organisation de la main d'oeuvre non-syndiqué, surtout celle du nombre croissant de travailleuses et de jeunes personnes dans les emplois à temps partiel, pose un défi primordial aux syndicats. La restructuration de l'industrie de la restauration au lendemain de la Seconde Guerre mondiale engendra une situation de travail qui rendit inefficaces les stratégies d'organisation du milieu de travail traditionnel.

Le présent article explore l'évolution de la condition du travailleur et de la travailleuse dans le secteur de la restauration-minute. Cette monographie démontre comment une approche féministe à l'étude du travail, en insistant sur les liens entre le travail rémunéré, la famille et la collectivité, fournit un modèle plus adéquat sur lequel développer des stratégies aptes à la compréhension de ce milieu de travail de plus en plus répandu.

# The Interchangeable Worker and Fighting Back: Identifying Some Strategic Issues

Ester Reiter

WORKPLACE ORGANIZING AND MILITANCY are the tactics that workers have used to protect their interests against the advances of capital. In the post World War II period, the trade union movement has been successful in improving wages and working conditions for working people - primarily in large industrial workplaces such as auto or steel works, where male breadwinners are employed over long periods of time. In smaller-scale firms, especially those in more competitive industries such as the garment trades, trade unions have found it harder to improve working conditions.

Even those sectors afforded the protection of collective bargaining have found in recent years, however, that it does not provide sufficient mechanisms for guaranteeing adequate social and economic entitlements. Plant shut-downs and relocations, reduction in wages and benefits are widespread, aided by technological advances that make large numbers of workers dispensable. Existing collective bargaining structures have been unable to protect organized workers, let alone provide the means to organize new sectors of the working class - the growing numbers of women with families and young people seeking paid employment.

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The debate about the value of trade unions in affecting significant social change dates back to the nineteenth century. Marx and Engels, Lenin, Trotsky all had differing views on the effectiveness of trade unions in developing a revolutionary consciousness.<sup>1</sup> More recently, feminists have noted that there is a masculine bias in the assumption that the workplace is the only arena for collective struggle.<sup>2</sup> Gender, family, and kinship relations organize the unified paid and unpaid labour of class maintenance and reproduction and therefore need to be considered in order to understand patterns of consent and resistance at the workplace. The unquestioning acceptance of gender roles which place paid work as the primary terrain for men and household and childcare as women's primary concern ignores the links between gender, family, household, and paid work and the ways in which non-waged work within the family is linked to waged work.<sup>3</sup>

The fast food industry illustrates trends that exist in a growing number of industries, particularly in the service sector. During the post war period, both a market for fast food and a labour force for this industry were developed. The market was able to expand by convincing families to eat their meals away from home. The labour force consisted of women with families and young people still attending high school full time; both groups welcomed the opportunity of part-time employment, even at minimum wage, with irregular hours.<sup>4</sup>

The restructuring of the industry presents a particular challenge to labour - how can one organize small groups of workers in separate establishments that are owned and controlled by large, transnational corporations? Any individual establishment that proves too troublesome can easily be dispensed with. The workforce in the industry - women and teenaged part-time workers - do not necessarily consider their jobs in fast food as their primary commitments; with the wages they earn, they are not and cannot be the primary breadwinners.<sup>5</sup> In turn, these part-time workers have not been given serious consideration by the trade union movement.<sup>6</sup>

In the paper that follows, I will sketch out the restructuring of the restaurant industry in the post war years. I will also look at how a different model

<sup>1</sup>Richard Hyman, *Marxism and the Sociology of Trade Unions* (London 1975).

<sup>2</sup>For example, Cynthia Cockburn, *Brothers - Male Dominance and Technological Change* (London 1983), Louise Tilly and Joan Scott, *Women, Work and Family* (New York), Karen Brodtkin Sacks, "Generations of Working Class Families," in Karen Brodtkin Sacks, ed., *My Troubles Are Going To Have Trouble With Me* (New Brunswick 1984).

<sup>3</sup>Myra Marx Ferree, "Sacrifice, Satisfaction and Social Change: Employment and the Family," in Sacks, *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup>Ester Reiter, "Out of the Frying Pan and Into the Fryer: The Organization of Work in the Fast Food Industry," Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Toronto, 1985.

<sup>5</sup>Joan Smith, "The Paradox of Women's Poverty: Wage Earning Women and Economic Transformation," *Signs*, 10 (year), 291-310.

<sup>6</sup>Julie White, *Women and Part-Time Work* (Ottawa 1983).

for analyzing this workplace might be used to develop more effective trade union tactics to improve working conditions in this area. It is also useful to consider what strategies used by the fast food companies in promoting their product and managing their workforce can teach us about developing a model suitable to the typical worker of the late 1980s. I will also speculate on how tactics employed in unionizing drives in the service sector, in particular the Eaton's drives of the 1940s and 1980s might be used in building an understanding of workers' and consumers' rights in fast food outlets.

### *The Transformation of the Restaurant Business*

THE RESTAURANT BUSINESS was a booming one during the World War II years. By 1942, restaurant sales had doubled from the level of the late 1930s, and by the war's end, industry growth had almost quadrupled.<sup>7</sup> A number of factors had tended to increase restaurant patronage during the war years: many men were in the armed forces and women were encouraged to help the war effort by leaving home to take on paid work or to do volunteer work. Many workers were on swing shifts, and housing shortages forced families to share accommodations. The demand for restaurants mushroomed, but meeting it was difficult. Materials were hard to come by, and even more important, labour was in short supply.<sup>8</sup>

The change from craft-based to mass production technologies requiring different workplace and consumer behaviour occurred later in the restaurant industry than in many others. For most industries in North America, the change came in the 1920s, coinciding with the development of scientific management and a new philosophy of workplace organization. However, when William Whyte studied the restaurant industry in the mid 1940s, it still resembled what Marx called "manufacture" rather than large scale production. Both skilled and unskilled workers were essential in the industry, and the problem Whyte described was one of coordinating the work of many people for the efficient production of a meal. Management's task was to make the restaurant a good place to work.

Timing and coordination are the keynotes of the operation. . . . The restaurant is an organization made up of highly interdependent parts. . . . The parts are the people who handle the food and adjust their work to each other.<sup>9</sup>

Mechanization was encouraged not in order to replace workers, but to increase their efficiency and to improve morale. Restaurants and Institutions, the Canadian restaurant magazine, recommended that restaurants purchase

<sup>7</sup>Canada, 1951 Ninth Census of Canada (Vol. 7, pt 2) *Distribution and Retail Trade* (Cat. No. 65-535).

<sup>8</sup>*Canadian Hotel and Restaurant Magazine* (CHR), 15 June 1944.

<sup>9</sup>William Whyte, *Human Relations in the Restaurant Industry* (New York 1948) 3-4.

a dishwasher machine so that the "HELP WANTED" sign could be changed from 'Dishwasher wanted' to 'Dish Machine Operator' and a "...better class of worker" attracted.<sup>10</sup> People had jobs and they had money; given a choice, few wanted to work in restaurants.

One Toronto restaurateur recalls:

Restaurants were extremely profitable during the war. It was extremely difficult to get staff. There just weren't any people around to do the work. . . . In those years, nobody would work in the industry except immigrants and of course there weren't any immigrants during the war and for quite a few years after.<sup>11</sup>

When the war ended, eating establishments had become a major industry, but restaurant owners were uncertain how long the boom would last. Relatively small operations with working proprietors still characterized the restaurant industry in the years immediately following World War II. In the 1951 Canadian census, 10,191 restaurants were enumerated while there were 12,378 working proprietors.<sup>12</sup>

The situation soon began to change and prospects for a permanently expanded market became evident. Economic growth, the revolution in transportation (by 1954, there were 4 million vehicles on the highways), and suburban development created the possibility for new markets. A *Restaurants and Institutions* article entitled "Money by the Roadsides" stated:

. . . The noisy, hard-riding auto of yesteryear has become the sleek, powerful family car of today. Muddy roads have become superhighways and the ranks of car owners legion. Indeed this is a country on the move and because of this, road-side services have increased not only in number but, like the automobile, sleekness and comfort. Motels, restaurants, service stations hedge our busy main roads, jostling for the business and the favours of the passerby.<sup>13</sup>

The industry promoters also discovered the magic of a new, virtually unlimited market - the family at home. Challenging the housewife was taking on stiff competition for "she puts love into her cooking." The solution was advertising "using all the gimmicks and approaches you can think of." The industry magazine suggested appealing to the housewife herself, "Tired of spring housecleaning? Don't cook dinner, call us." or "Save your pep for the picnic".<sup>14</sup>

Teenagers too were wooed:

Teenagers love noise - loud, raucous noise. The high pitched gabble, the teenage version of small talk can drive an adult almost to the brink of insanity. . . (but). Even in their somewhat

<sup>10</sup>*Restaurants and Institutions* (R&I), *Canadian Restaurant Magazine* now called *Foodservice and Hospitality* (January 1951).

<sup>11</sup>Personal Communication, Gus Boukydis, owner of Diana Sweets, June 1984.

<sup>12</sup>Canada, 1951 *Ninth Census of Canada* (Vol. 7, pt 2) *Distribution and Retail Trade* (Cat. No. 65-535).

<sup>13</sup>*R&I*, September-October 1956, 37.

<sup>14</sup>*CHR*, 15 September 1955, 23.

metamorphic state, they can prove to be good, though not affluent customers when handled with imagination, determination, restraint and authority.<sup>15</sup>

At first, labour supply prevented some restaurants from taking advantage of these new opportunities. In Don Mills, a Diana Sweets restaurant reported that shortage of workers was a difficult problem in the new suburban expansion.

Perhaps the greatest single factor that had to be considered was labour. Lack of staff is the bane of most suburban food service operations. It costs them dearly in actual loss of business.<sup>16</sup>

A few years later, the solution to the perennial problem of the industry - lack of skilled and reliable workers willing to work for low wages - was in sight. "Convenience foods," foods prepared in central locations by food processors, brightened the industry's future. Together with the use of frozen and dehydrated foods, they would transform the industry. "Custom made food will soon be as luxurious as custom-made automobiles and shirts."<sup>17</sup>

The Restaurant Association assured the small restaurant owner, still common in the industry, that relying on mass produced products from large food processors such as Kraft would not threaten his position *vis-à-vis* the larger chains. Quite the contrary, mass produced food was the solution to rising labour costs. It was the "... answer of the little man's plight against the chains in a new area of 'total retailing'."<sup>18</sup>

### *Franchising and the Entry of Big Business*

SMALL BUSINESSMEN NOT ONLY welcomed the opportunity to save on food costs through buying convenience foods, many also lined up to take advantage of what seemed like a bottomless gold mine, the franchised restaurant, imported from the United States. Franchising was seized upon by small businessmen as a way of reducing their risks in an industry with a very high failure rate.<sup>19</sup> The marketing advantages of system wide promotional campaigns, and the economies of scale available through collective buying power, appeared attractive. For a few lucky proprietors in the early years, the system worked. Mr. Boukydis, owner of Diana Sweets, one of Toronto's oldest restaurants, recalled the early Kentucky Fried Chicken franchisees.

They'd buy the Colonel's system and recipes, and so on and put in his equipment, his pressure friers and that was it. Actually the colonel made more millionaires in Canada, particularly Western Canada, than anybody else.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>15</sup>*R&I*, November-December 1956.

<sup>16</sup>*Foodservice and Hospitality Magazine (FSH)* - formerly *Restaurants and Institutions*, 23 October 1967, 5.

<sup>17</sup>*FSH*, 23 October 1967, 5.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup>*R&I*, April 1960, 25.

<sup>20</sup>Personal Communication, June 1983.

Others did not fare so well. Would-be investors were warned that small businessmen sometimes were lured into investing all they had and losing everything. “. . . Several of our American cousins have been badly bitten.”<sup>21</sup> The franchisers were, for the most part, companies located in the United States. One Canadian exception, Gentlemen Jim Steak took no chances at placing “itself at competitive disadvantage by revealing its Canadian origin.” The company used a Detroit address from which to promote its product.<sup>22</sup>

Franchising, which began to grow in Canada in the 1960's, enabled companies to expand rapidly without large outlays of capital. It was a way for United States based companies to take hold of the Canadian market. Through royalty payments, (a percentage of gross sales), companies benefited from the successful operation of their franchisees without the necessity of involving themselves in day-to-day business decisions. Most importantly, franchising was (and remains) a way of linking the entrepreneurial energies of the small operator to a large company.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, large multinational food corporations entered the restaurant business directly. By 1970, 66 per cent of the fast food business in Canada was in the hands of 14 companies, and the predictions were for growing dominance of fast food by a handful of companies.<sup>23</sup> Conglomerates such as Unilever, Pillsbury, Hublein, General Foods, General Mills, Imasco, and Pepsico bought restaurant chains to diversify their holdings. (McDonald's still remains an exception, a giant in its own right. In 1984, McDonald's controlled 50 per cent of the burger market and 25 per cent of all fast food business in Canada.)<sup>24</sup>

After the initial expansion through franchising, the next step was for the franchisers to buy back the more successful locations from their franchisees. McDonald's was one of the earliest companies to do this. George Cohon arranged the purchase of the western franchise, and then sold the entire Canadian territory back to the parent, becoming president of the Canadian subsidiary in 1970. More recently Wendy's International successfully resumed ownership of the Canadian Wendy's operation.

Strategies for growth are couched in metaphors of “invasions,” “battles” and “attacks” and take various forms. After the initial period of expansion ended, companies sought different methods of maintaining high rates of growth. Re-entering existing markets, (such as highway locations) is one such method, while expansion into institutional markets, (the military, schools, hospitals) is another. In Toronto, McDonald's holds exclusive food-

<sup>21</sup> *R&I*, April 1960, 25.

<sup>22</sup> *CHR*, 15 May 1966, 40.

<sup>23</sup> *FSH*, September 1970.

<sup>24</sup> *Financial Post* (FP), Aug. 1985.

service rights in the Metro Zoo and has negotiated for a similar setup in the proposed domed stadium.

Regardless of the economic climate, the large companies grow larger. In 1977, when inflation and growth rates were on the rise, the Canadian financial analysts Laventhol and Horwath reported that

The fact about the food service industry is that it is dominated by a small group of corporate giants who will increase their market position dramatically in the future.<sup>25</sup>

During the recession of 1982-83, the bankruptcy rate for restaurants rose. While the small mom-and-pop restaurants fell by the wayside, giants such as McDonald's continued to increase their share of the market in North America. When the economic climate improved in 1984, the top chains with an enlarged share of the market experienced larger growth rates than the smaller chains or the independents.<sup>26</sup>

The international giants have the resources to expand in Canada whenever they wish. Thus, for example, Burger King, with the help of its parent, Pillsbury, embarked on an expansion program in Canada that moved it from 21st on the list in 1981 to 10th place in just two years time.<sup>27</sup>

The continued expansion of a market - convincing people that they need and want a "dining out experience" - was the result of the expenditure of vast amounts of money by the food giants in advertising campaigns. Fast food was designed to lure families out of the home, by providing a meal at a price that everyone could afford. As eating out became more popular in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the eating habits of the population were transformed. According to *Advertising Age*, family meals are becoming a thing of the past: "In one generation we have gone from a traditional food producing society to a food grazing society - one where we eat wherever we happen to be."<sup>28</sup> In families where the wife is a wage earner, approximately 30 cents out of every food dollar in Canada is spent on food eaten away from home.<sup>29</sup> As the market for fast food and other commodities such as fashionable clothing and entertainment has been extended to a broader social base, people need more money to pay for the heavily advertised products. New jobs are available in these same industries. The process is circular.

### *The Creation of the Interchangeable Worker*

IN THE 1940s AND 1950s, expansion of the restaurant industry was limited by the difficulty of obtaining sufficient supplies, and of hiring reliable wor-

<sup>25</sup>Report on the Canadian Foodservice Industry, Mimeo, Toronto 1977.

<sup>26</sup>*Nation's Restaurant News* (NRN), 8 August 1984.

<sup>27</sup>*FSH*, September 1984.

<sup>28</sup>30 October 1978, 65.

<sup>29</sup>Canada, *Family Food Expenditure in Canada* (1982).



kers. The technology developed for mass-producing foods enabled the industry to expand enormously. As large capital took over the industry, initially through franchising, the resources were available to develop a work process and utilize a technology that further minimized the problem of finding suitable labour. The complex hierarchy of skilled and unskilled workers needed to prepare a meal was replaced by a work organization in which workers with minimal skills and experience could be used productively.

McDonald's was the pioneer in this development. By the early 1970s it had developed a technology and a labour process for its retail outlets that it celebrated as

A machine that produces, with the help of totally unskilled machine tenders, a highly polished produce. Through painstaking attention to total design and facilities planning, everything is built integrally into the machine itself, into the technology of the system. The only choice available to the attendant is to operate it exactly as the designers intended.<sup>30</sup>

The system worked so well, that, as one Burger King worker described it "a trained monkey could do this job."<sup>31</sup>

Ways were soon found not only to employ unskilled workers, but to employ them in such a fashion as to minimize the costs of their labour by careful deployment. During the 1970s, the development of small microprocessor chips meant that electronic cash registers could be linked to an in-store computer which collects information on unit levels. As electronic cash registers were introduced into the larger chains, such as McDonald's and Burger King, it became possible to plan staffing needs according to hourly sales projections. As a result, a scheduling system was implemented in the late 1970's that required workers to make themselves available for work at any time. Each worker is scheduled one week in advance to come to work for a fixed number of three hour shifts; but a worker may be asked to leave if business is slower than anticipated. Workers are given no guarantee that they will be called for a minimum number of hours.

By 1980, it was possible to deploy main-frame technology, originally developed for military uses during World War II to assist in Operations Research in the management of fast food restaurants. The establishment of time-motion standards for assembling the meal are no longer left to the stop watch at local installations. The system, in the words of the Director of Operations at Burger King, is:

...based on the fact that fast food restaurants operate like manufacturing plants today - not - restaurants. . . . We take raw materials, turn them into a variety of quality products, package them and deliver them. It's just like a factory. Except that production and speed of service are key.

<sup>30</sup>Theodore Levitt, "Production-line Approach to Service," *Harvard Business Review*, 50 (1972), 41-52.

<sup>31</sup>Personal Communication, June 1982.

The computer tells us where to put people to get the best possible service and how to use the least number of persons at any given time for the least possible cost. . . while maintaining speed of service.<sup>32</sup>

While the computer assisted in implementing an organization of work based on Taylorist principles, management paid a great deal of attention to the social aspects of the workplace. A Human Relations "sales pitch" was used to encourage workers to work hard, and to enlist their loyalty to the company. It was stressed that the satisfaction of assembling the meal for the customer quickly, and with a smile, as part of the Burger King or McDonald's "team" should be great enough to substitute for decent wages and benefits. Any worker dissatisfaction was blamed on the store manager for not maintaining good "morale" in this highly regulated workplace.

Thus, the problem of labour seemed solved. Women with families, and teenagers still attending school, needed and wanted jobs. Part-time workers provided an economical means of keeping labour costs low; hiring such workers was made possible by a technology that could sustain the high turnover in this kind of work.

An ex Burger King manager described the situation of married women who work in fast food:

Lets face it - what other kinds of jobs are available. Where else can they go - to a variety store? They have responsibilities to their kids, want to see them off to school and be there for them when they get home in the afternoon. They have demanding husbands who come home from work at night and want to be looked after.<sup>33</sup>

A young ex fast food worker talked about how she felt:

Fast food chains are a nice way for a high school student to pick up extra money but its not for me. Many fast food employers take advantage of inexperienced kids who are new to the work force. They know that for every kid they hire there are a thousand more like them they can get to replace them. The kids work hard — very hard for just minimum wage.<sup>34</sup>

While the labour force available to the industry greatly expanded with the development of a technology which allowed workers to assemble foods preprocessed elsewhere, even this new labour force of women and teenagers is subject to fluctuations similar to those that have historically plagued the industry.

In 1982, when unemployment was very high, restaurants reported that labour turnover was down' there were long lines of job applicants for even these minimum wage jobs. As soon as the economy picked up even a little, the search for hourly workers was on. "Any time the economy is good, we have a problem" reported one vice president of personnel.<sup>35</sup> Today too,

<sup>32</sup>*Restaurant Business*, Aug. 1982.

<sup>33</sup>Personal Communication, May 1981.

<sup>34</sup>Charner and Fraser, *Fast Food Jobs* (1985) Appendix B, 12.

<sup>35</sup>*NRN*, 12 Nov. 1984, 1.

reports from the industry reiterate the old complaint of problems with a labour supply. As the baby boom has ended, there is once again, according to the industry, a dearth of workers willing to take jobs with the pay and conditions offered in the service industries.<sup>36</sup>

### *Unions and the Fast Food Industry*

IN THE FAST FOOD INDUSTRY, we have an example of how oligopoly is related to the development of a particular kind of labour process and specific control techniques. The restaurant business has been transformed into an industry dominated by a few large transnational giants. The process of concentration continues: the recent takeover of Kentucky Fried Chicken by PepsiCo, which already owns a pizza chain and a Mexican food chain, now puts that company in the top three fast food conglomerates in the world.<sup>37</sup>

At the same time, the fast food industry has created both a market and a labour force through the socialization of one area of domestic labour. Changing patterns in family dining have led to a new work situation for many women and teenagers. While there may be immediate benefits for individuals in achieving partial economic independence through paid work, those benefits are won at the price of committing themselves to a very restrictive work situation. Workers soon find this out for themselves and they vote with their feet: they leave, at the rate of 300 per cent turnover a year. Because replacement costs are so low, however, these individual acts do not lead to a moderating of management prerogatives in the organization of the workplace.

Historically the restaurant industry has been very difficult to organize. Under existing collective bargaining legislation, the process of organizing in the fast food industry is almost guaranteed to be a losing battle. The workplace is small: a large fast food outlet might have a total of 100 workers on the payroll, with 20 to 25 working during the busiest times. People who work in these outlets generally do so because they have other obligations - either to their families or to school. The pay is so low, that workers cannot support themselves on their fast food income. There are no benefits other than those legislated. Turnover is so high, that even if workers express an interest in organizing a union, by the time the certification vote takes place, the group of workers has changed.<sup>38</sup>

The majority of workers are teenagers still in school, where they are taught to take orders. They enter the workplace ignorant of their rights, and with no idea that unions organize other than industrial workers. Finally, the em-

<sup>36</sup>*G&M*, 29 Sept. 1986, B1.

<sup>37</sup>*NRN*, 4 Aug. 1986, 1.

<sup>38</sup>Personal Communication W. Iler, Trade Union Organizer for CCU Restaurant Union, Sept. 1986.

ployer is wealthy and powerful, and can afford to lose all kinds of money in an effort to defeat the union, should a certification vote succeed.<sup>39</sup>

It's clear that the prospects for collective organization and resistance in this situation are not encouraging, yet the threat of unionization is serious enough that employers certainly consider it a possible danger. The industry as a whole, and individual companies as well, devote considerable resources to fending off any possible encroachment on their managerial prerogatives, whether through regulation by the state or through unionization. The idea of a union is anathema to employers.

The industry's objections to regulating wages and working conditions have a history probably as long as that of restaurants themselves. In 1937, the industry objected to the Hotel Association of Ontario's proposal for 30 cents hourly minimum wage for employees, with a 54 hour work week. Quebec's Fair Wage Act, introduced the same year, with a proposed 48 hour work week was termed "not only absurd but impossible" and "a menace to harmonious labour conditions."<sup>40</sup>

Some 44 years later, the Canadian Restaurant and Foodservices Association was still saying the same thing (in slightly different language). It maintained that any restrictions on hiring, terminations or other procedures involving part time employees would result in fewer jobs:

It is our experience that part time workers are not looking for greater benefits from their employers but are mainly concerned with working convenient hours for immediate remuneration.<sup>41</sup>

The CRFA, noting that their industry is a "...top employer of students in Canada" and that over half the industry workers are women strenuously opposed making any benefits, even Unemployment Insurance, available to part-time workers:

If increased Unemployment Insurance were extended to part time employees, they will become aware that they can apply for benefits when unemployed. This will lead to increased instability among this category of workers, since so many are secondary income earners.<sup>42</sup>

There have been sporadic attempts to organize in the industry, but delaying tactics used by employers are often fatal because of the high turnover rate in employment. During the Eaton's campaign in the 1940s, organizer Eileen Sufrin reported that a majority of the workers in the large restaurant division in Eaton's signed union cards. They applied for certification, however, as part of all Eaton's retail employees, and the vote was lost in 1951. In the early 1970s, attempts to organize McDonald's, Ponderosa and Steak n' Burger units in the Windsor, Ontario area were defeated over the

<sup>39</sup>Personal Communication, Bill Reno, UFCW, Sept. 1986.

<sup>40</sup>*CHR*, 15 Jan. 1938, 1.

<sup>41</sup>CRFA submission respecting "Part Time Work in the Foodservice Industry," Sept. 1982.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*

question of what constitutes a bargaining unit. The McDonald's franchise holder successfully argued that since employees can be transferred from one unit to another, all Windsor McDonald's would have to organize for a union to be recognized.<sup>43</sup> More recently an attempt to organize a McDonald's in British Columbia failed when the RWDSU failed to get a majority in the certification vote.

Nevertheless, the industry recognizes that although it is currently winning the battle against unions, the war is by no means over. At Hostex 1984 (the Foodservices Exhibit held annually in Toronto), the Ontario Restaurant Association display offered a handout entitled "UNIONS ARE NOT INEVITABLE." The pamphlet states ". . . if you start RIGHT NOW to follow a course of sound Positive Employee Relations, that will help you preserve your union free position." It warns employers that with a union present, they would no longer have the right to control their own businesses. A union, the pamphlet reports, is *very* expensive! Not only do unionized payroll expenses rise by 25-30 per cent for "unwarranted wages and benefits," but the lack of flexibility unions introduce into a workplace, and the "cumbersome" machinery set up by the "constraining provisions of a union contract," raise expenses even more. Most important, the pamphlet stresses, "you the owners, director and managers of your company, will *lose the right to manage your business.*"

Manager training programs at fast food places emphasize that only a poor manager will face a unionization drive. In the Basic Restaurant Operations Course at Burger King, for example, trainees are told that the three most important things for workers are: first, appreciation of work done, second, feeling in the know of things going on and third, sympathetic understanding of personal problems. Good wages rate fifth, promotion and growth ninth, and good working conditions last. Only a bad manager has an unhappy crew. It is within each manager's power to provide for employee "needs and wants" as defined by the company.

A manager doing his/her job will solve the problem of employee discontent through adequate communication. Store signs, crew meetings to tell crew about new policies, RAP (real approach to problem) sessions where selected crew members are invited to express their grievances all contribute to building what is called good communication.

Employees who understand what is going on and who feel a part of store life, develop a sense of loyalty and pride. As a result they work harmoniously with management.<sup>44</sup>

Furthermore, the running of a good restaurant is threatened when a union is organized. The union, it is claimed, "doesn't like productivity" and

<sup>43</sup>CRFA Union Fact Sheet, Dec. 1975.

<sup>44</sup>Burger King Operations Course Handout.

stewards will replace managers in counselling workers. People who organize are not standing up for their rights; rather they are voting against management. One must be particularly careful with teenagers and women as they are "more inclined to be upset."<sup>45</sup>

Thus it is argued that a union threatens the company's workplace control. Managers are warned that wages, job classification, job discipline will all be determined by the union; the restaurant will be a changed place where managers will no longer have access to the grapevine. The signs will be different; union notices and union newspapers will predominate and there will be an increased curiosity about things like pension plans. Even vocabulary will change. People will start using phrases such as "workers' rights."<sup>46</sup>

A large, transnational company such as Burger King demands standardization of operations in order to maintain centralized control over its stores. Burger King fears not only the increased wages, threatened by unionization, but the notion of a collectivity with rights, rather than a group of individuals with needs and wants, to be urged on by a manager "coach."

### *Feminism and a New Workplace Model and Strategy*

AS I HAVE STRESSED, it has been difficult to limit the power of large corporations such as Burger King, and virtually impossible to unionize in these situations. Because of the short-term part time nature of the work, and a scheduling system that reorganizes the crew daily, it is difficult for workers to identify with each other through the job. Unlike the work groups formed in settings where skilled workers can exert some influence in how the work gets done, in the fast food industry, the labour process is so organized that work groups are non-specific and ever changing.

The fast food industry is an example of the successful partial socialization of domestic labour by the flows of capital. It has been able to make use of a labour force available for work under limited conditions — married women with families who can work only at times that do not interfere with their domestic responsibilities and high school students who can work only evenings and weekends. The particular nature of the restaurant business has made it especially convenient to take advantage of a labour force historically used as a source of cheap labour. Wages and working conditions are based on the assumption that workers have access to support beyond their own earnings, and are therefore only partially committed to wage labour.

Feminists have argued that understanding workplace behaviour requires looking beyond the paid work situation. As women have been responsible for the domestic arena where children and workers, are fed, clothed, soothed and prepared for entry (or reentry) into the world of production, a feminist

<sup>45</sup> Advanced Operations Course Handout, Mimeo, 1982.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

focus makes clear why gender relations and the sexual division of labour cannot be taken for granted or ignored in analyzing productive relations. Likewise, age relations and the division of responsibilities related to age will also sometimes play an important role. What happens in the sixteen or so hours not spent at work can have a profound impact on how paid employment is experienced and understood. Work, family, school, community are not separate and distinct spheres with rules and structures that operate independently of each other. Rather they interconnect and interact with each other.

If understandings developed in other areas of our lives are imported into the workplace, then it follows that how families are organized, the content of curriculum in our schools, our recreation facilities, our sense of community are of concern. In order to understand this kind of workplace, it is necessary to consider the context in which this kind of work takes place - the social locations of workers outside the job.

Recent socialist and feminist theorists<sup>47</sup> have stressed that both waged work and family lives are shaped by the needs of corporate capital. Gender divisions within the family place an ideological fog over the reality that the work of women and teenagers are contributions to the family economy. This directly affects the kinds of work and worklives men, women and teenagers can expect to face in the immediate future. Thus a workplace model that assumes that the social relations at the point of production are primary, needs to be reconsidered. If it is understood that both production and reproduction are necessary aspects of maintaining human life, and the sex/gender system is a social rather than a biological construction, then the effects of the social division of labour become variables to be considered and explained. The situations where productive relations do seem to be the primary factors in workers response need to be analyzed as particular situations rather than adopted as the norm for all workers in all types of workplaces.

Feminist contributions to developing a workplace model that more accurately reflects the ingredients involved in workplace response can be used to develop more effective trade union strategies for dealing with a variety of situations. The following is a preliminary and very speculative attempt to envision what such a strategy might involve for the fast food industry.

Big business has understood and used the linkages between work and family for its own financial gain. Young people and women, the groups avail-

<sup>47</sup>For example, Harry Braverman, *Labour and Monopoly Capital* (New York 1974), R. Baxandall, E. Ewen and L. Gordon "The Working Class has Two Sexes," *Monthly Review*, 28, (1976) 1-9, Batya Weinbaum and Amy Bridges, "The Other Side of the Paycheck: Monopoly Capital and the Structure of Capitalism," in Zillah Eisenstein ed., *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case For Socialist Feminism* (New York 1979), Meg Luxton, *More Than a Labour of Love* (Toronto 1980), Hugh Armstrong and Pat Armstrong, *The Double Ghetto: Canadian Women and their Segregated Work* (Toronto 1984), Harriet Rosenberg, "The Home is the Workplace," in *Through the Kitchen Window: The Politics of Home and Family* (Toronto 1986).

able for marginal employment, are now the principal source of labour for economic activities in one of the highest growth areas in North America. For women in particular, work is no longer a choice, but the nature of the jobs available still dictate economic dependence. Thus, in recent decades, the expansion of the economy has been premised on the availability of workers who will act as though they are marginal, people who are not "really" workers. Thus we have the contradiction of an economic growth that is based on the lives of women and teenagers as nonwage workers, so that they can properly be considered a cheap and dispensable labour force.<sup>48</sup> The same characteristics that have facilitated the rapid growth of the fast food industry, however, can also serve to limit the power of large corporations that have benefited from its expansion. The workers who form the backbone of the fast food industry are the same population from which customers are drawn. Most customers have family, friends, and neighbours who have worked in a fast food outlet.

Workers are also consumers and consumers have been able to have some limited impact on this industry. Objections to the use of sulfites known to cause severe reactions in asthmatic customers has led to banning their use on fries and salad bar, effective September 1986.<sup>49</sup> The Center for Science in the Public Interest in Washington D.C. is currently leading a campaign to make labelling of the ingredients used in fast food mandatory. The issue is not "Where's the Beef?" but What's in it?, said Representative Steve Solarz, in presenting the bill to a House Committee in the U.S.<sup>50</sup>

Large companies have used the linkages between community and industry to their advantage. They have invaded and taken over communal activities and public space for their own private gain. McDonald's and Burger King spend millions of dollars in advertising campaigns convincing consumers of the relationship between their restaurants, and charitable, community minded endeavors. School picnics, community fairs, Ronald McDonald houses for sick children are all used as relatively cheap promotions for the company. In September 1986, traffic in downtown Kingston was stopped by the local event of the month, a highly advertised McMill for charity. One CBC reporter claimed McDonald's spent more money on advertising its connection with Rick Hansen, the wheelchair athlete, in his trip from one end of Canada to another than it donated to defray his expenses. It was not possible to photograph him without including a promotion of McDonald's because of the paraphernalia the company had provided him with.<sup>51</sup> The message is a two

<sup>48</sup>Joan Smith, "The Paradox of Women's Poverty: Wage Earning Women and Economic Transformation", *Signs* 10 (1984), 291-310.

<sup>49</sup>*NRN*, 15 August 1986.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup>Personal Communication, November 1986.



fold one: first, the immediate association of a hamburger with a community minded activity; secondly, in the case of charitable activities, in the spirit of the companies origins, private enterprise is celebrated, and individual initiative applauded as the solution for social problems. Paraplegics have no *right* guaranteed by the state to the preconditions for a decent life, they must rely on the extraordinary efforts of an extraordinary young man for "charity."

McDonald's has also made an effort to stress that their outlets are not just good places to buy hamburgers because of their community mindedness, but are also good places for young people to work. One advertisement featuring a former fast food worker claims that "The enthusiasm and the 'smile for everyone' I required then, I require now. McDonald's gave me basic training in public relations." The former worker's testimonial ends saying that "Working at McDonald's wasn't just a job. It was an event."<sup>52</sup>

The tactics successfully employed by the large companies need to be turned to the advantage of workers. Consumers can use their power to influence not just what goes in the food, but the conditions under which the food is produced. Granted that trade unions are operating within a legal framework that focuses on single workplaces, nevertheless it must be understood why a narrow economist model of organizing will have limited success in achieving even modest goals of bettering the wages and working conditions for small groups of workers.

The structural inequality in bargaining power between a large firm and labour in a small workplace such as a fast food outlet is a problem that has to be recognized and dealt with. The ideological message put out by companies such as Burger King, or McDonald's needs to be countered by a different one stressing that young people and women in part time jobs are workers too and they can change a situation they do not like. Burger King and McDonald's are quite inventive in dreaming up promotional activities to engender the loyalty of their crew, and to increase sales. Unions cannot afford to be any less so. The union movement must be prepared to counter this propaganda with news about what is really going on in these outlets.

The involvement and resources of the entire trade union movement are required to organize in the service sector, in places such as fast food outlets. The first Eaton's drive was a project undertaken by the entire Congress of Canadian Labour, which set up a Department Store Organizing Committee to support the drive to organize Eaton's. The campaign included a newsletter, paid advertisements on radio, leafletting, socials, events sponsored by the Union and supported by the entire trade union movement. The recent Eaton's drive had the support of the Women's community. In addition to picketing in support of an Eaton's boycott, and distributing pro union bal-

<sup>52</sup> *Maclean's*, 27 January 1986.

loons, and shopping bags, in the spirit of the first Eaton's drive, the strikers were the focus for the International Women's Day Coalition march in 1985. 4,000 marchers contributed visibility and moral support to the striking Eaton's workers. One of the highlights of the campaign was a benefit concert the women organized for the strikers, which included some of Canada's most prominent artists, musicians and writers, from the Parachute Club to Eric Petersen, Margaret Atwood and others.

It is necessary to pressure the state for collective bargaining and workplace legislation suited to the 1980s. The Ontario Labour Relations Board has recently implemented a flexible policy with respect to recognizing one or more workplaces of an employer as bargaining units. Ontario has just instituted first contract legislation, Quebec has laws prohibiting the hiring of strike breakers. These measures will help a little. State regulation of the minimum wage and minimum shifts are the means by which conditions for most workers in the service sector have been improved, and these are arenas which need to be pursued further. Trade unions need to set the terms under which employers operate in all workplaces.

While none of these tactics are in themselves sufficient, they are examples of measures that could help, even if many of them are highly speculative. Discontent with the working conditions in fast food is not a question of conjecture. The disaffection with fast food work does not need to be encouraged or invented. It exists, but at the moment it manifests itself in individual acts that do not really challenge management's prerogatives. When people are unhappy with a scheduling system that demands virtually full time availability from them with no commitment to them, they leave the job. When the pay does not seem worth the trouble, they quit. When they get tired of smiling, they either are "terminated" or they do not show up for their shift.

Our educational system is geared to helping people fit into the world of work by providing the necessary training so that we will have a suitably skilled workforce and thereby attract capital investment, that is jobs. The North York Board of Education includes training in Wendy's as part of their cooperative work project. It seems that the emphasis is on fitting the products of the educational system into corporate needs. Virtually no information is provided students on what they may rightfully expect from their employers. Young people need to be taught about the history of unions in this country, and what working people have done to improve their situation. The state has a responsibility not only to equip its citizens to take jobs, but also to understand and value the hard won gains in conditions of work that previous generations have won.

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