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Résumé de l'article

Les femmes combattantes dans le district canadien du syndicat des électriciens,des techniciens de la radio et des machinistes unis d'Amérique (UE) pendant les périodes postérieures à la Seconde guerre mondiale ainsi qu'à la Guerre froide, ont défié la thèse soutenant que la conscience de classe est incompatible avec la conscience féminine.

Encouragées par la confiance professée par les autorités concernant l'égalité des sexes et sécurisées par Ã importance stratégique du fait qu'elles formaient le quart des membres de l'association, les femmes combattantes ont non seulement refusé d'accepter le statut de classe secondaire à l'intérieur du syndicat, mais elles ont invoqué au nom de la solidarité, l'appui actif des hommes pour les droits de la femme. Même si leurs arguments pour l'analyse de la conscience féminine dans la lutte des classes n'ont pas réussi à convaincre les autorités du syndicat concerné, leurs lutte a jeté les bases du développement du féminisme dans la classe ouvrière qui a émergé plus tard à l'intérieur du syndicat

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Fair Play or Fair Pay? Gender Relations, Class Consciousness, and Union Solidarity in the Canadian UE

Julie Guard

UNION SOLIDARITY was a topic of heated debate at the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers' (UE) District Council meeting of June 1954, held in Peterborough, Ontario. One after another, the women delegates rose, in a carefully orchestrated display of gender solidarity, to demand that the union take immediate action on its long-standing promise to fight for equality in the workplace. The women who comprised almost a quarter of the UE's membership would not be mobilized, the women council members warned their fellow delegates, unless there was a significant improvement in the men's support for women's rights. "Women's rights is one of our biggest fights in the union today," Theresa Murray stated. Ivy Harris concurred:

> Our union has an obligation — far greater today than ever before to ... [take] up the problems of women's right[s] ... and bring ... our women members closer to the union and ... into the fight on all fronts .... The struggle against injustice and inequality as they immediately affect women ... cannot be regarded as being for the special benefit of women but must be understood for what it is —a struggle to strengthen the position of the workers as a whole.

Castigating the men for giving only "lip service" support to women's struggle, women delegates argued that women's issues were not a "special problem," but a valid concern of the whole union, and called on union leaders to make equality for women workers a priority. "The union does not give enough attention to the girls' problems .... It is time the union got down to brass tacks and did something for [the]

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girls," declared Audrey Hisson. "What we need now is action," urged Evelyn Armstrong. "[W]e have talked and talked — now is the time to start."[1]

These women, members of an elite cadre of activists within the Canadian UE, are the embodiment of an historical oxymoron. In an era that defined female respectability in terms of domesticity and maternal responsibility, and blamed wage-earning women for a vast array of personal and social ills, including family breakdown, male impotence, and juvenile delinquency,[2] they were staunch unionists who drew self-confidence and a sense of entitlement from their experience as workers. In the chill of the cold war, they passionately endorsed class struggle and publicly aligned themselves with a notoriously "red" union. During the period considered to be the trough of quiescence between the first and second waves of the feminist movement, they promoted gender consciousness within their union, led political lobbies for equal rights, and campaigned for gender equality within their communities.[3] Rejecting prevailing notions of unionism as a masculine activity in which respectable women played no part, they took an active and aggressive role in strikes and other forms of labour militancy. And in response to their leaders' disparagement of women's rights as a divisive issue that created unnecessary conflict and threatened labour unity, they deployed the language of union solidarity to demand men's support in the struggle for gender equality, insisting that the problems of women workers were integral to working-class struggle.[4]

[1]United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America, District Five, National Archives (hereafter UENA) District Council Meeting 19-20 June 1954, transcript minutes, 2-3, 7-8, 48-9.

[2]Katherine Arnup, *Education for Motherhood: Advice for Mothers in Twentieth-Century Canada* (Toronto 1994); Mary Louise Adams, "The Trouble With Normal: Teenagers and the Construction of Sexuality in Post-War Canada," PhD Thesis, University of Toronto, 1993; Margaret Hillyard Little, "No Car, No Radio, No Liquor Permit: The Moral Regulation of Single Mothers in Ontario, 1920-1993," PhD Thesis, York University, 1993; Veronica Strong-Boag, "Women With a Choice: Canada's Wage-Earning Wives and the Construction of the Middle Class: 1945-60," *Journal of Canadian Studies* (forthcoming), Spring 1995. In addition to the Canadian work, there is a considerable body of American scholarship in this area, which includes, Wini Breines, *Young, White and Miserable: Growing Up Female in the Fifties* (Boston 1992); Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment* (Garden City, NY 1983); Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York 1988).

[3]Recent studies of UE women in the USA argue that a similar, although not identical, situation prevailed there. See, Lisa Kannenberg, "From World War to Cold War: Women Electrical Workers and Their Union, 1940-1955," MA Thesis, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, 1990; Nancy B. Palmer, "Sexuality and War Plants in the 1940s: Working Women 'Invade' Male Factories," paper presented at the Ninth Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, Rutgers, NJ, 1993.

[4]This representation of class consciousness contrasts with arguments advanced by a number of scholars, who suggest that female gender consciousness and class consciousness are

These untimely assertions of gender-conscious trade unionism were predicated on an unusual combination of factors, one of which was women's relative security in the electrical industry workforce. The large electrical companies that had, by the 1950s, achieved near-monopolistic control over the industry had recognized quite early the advantages of employing female workers.[5] Women were considered ideal for many of the jobs in electrical manufacturing, particularly those demanding attention to detail and dextrous fingers. Even more importantly, women were willing to endure the grinding monotony of such operations, and at lower rates of pay than male workers. By 1937, when the UE began organizing electrical workers in Ontario, women were an accepted and permanent component of the electrical workforce, and the union's recruitment and bargaining strategies had to take women into account.[6] Indeed, as UE activists frequently reminded the membership, bargaining higher wages for women workers was not only good for the female members of the union, it also served the interests of the men, for whom lower-paid women workers constituted a brake on male wages and a potential threat to male jobs.[7]

The strategic importance of accommodating women's interests became even more pronounced after 1939, when Canada's entry into World War II resulted in an even larger proportion of women in the industry.[8] As in other industries, women

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traditionally incompatible. The most recent Canadian to make this case is Ruth A. Frager, *Sweatshop Strife: Class, Ethnicity, and Gender in the Jewish Labour Movement of Toronto, 1900-1939* (Toronto 1992). For a more detailed examination of the evidence of female gender consciousness in the Canadian UE, see, Julie Guard, "The Woman Question in Canadian Unionism: Women in the UE, 1930s to 1960s," PhD Thesis, University of Toronto, 1994.

[5]Ronald W. Schatz, *The Electrical Workers: A History of Labor at General Electric and Westinghouse 1923-60* (Urbana 1983).

[6]Douglas Caldwell, "The United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers, District Five, Canada, 1937 to 1956," MA Thesis, University of Western Ontario, 1976, 22-74; UENA, Organizers Reports, 1944-47 (incomplete); UENA, Hamilton Office, Correspondence, General, George Harris to Bob Ward, 21 January 1944; UENA, Local 527 Peterborough, Correspondence, CGE, "Draft Organization Program for C.G.E.-Peterborough"; UENA, 1945 St. Catharines Office, Correspondence, N. Hamblin to Ross Russell, 26 March 1945; UENA, 1946 Peterborough Office, Correspondence, Bob [Ward] to [Ross] Rus[ssell], 5 May 1946.

[7]Ruth Milkman, whose study is the starting point for any examination of the gender relations in the UE, argues that this was the primary motive behind the union's defence of women workers. See, Ruth Milkman, "American Women and Industrial Unionism during World War II," in *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars*, Margaret Randolph Higonnet, Jane Jenson, Sonya Michel, Margaret Collins Weitz, eds. (New Haven 1987), 168-81, and *Gender at Work: The Dynamics of Job Segregation by Sex during World War II* (Urbana 1987).

[8]Dominion Bureau of Statistics, *Canadian Labour Force Estimates 1931-1945*, Reference Paper No. 23 (Revised), (1957), Table 3, 17; UENA, 1946 District Council Five, Miscella-

replaced men who had left their jobs to fight overseas, but they also filled most of the new jobs in the munitions and military equipment plants set up by the giant electrical firms, Canadian General Electric (CGE), Canadian Westinghouse, and Northern Electric, to meet wartime production needs.[9] But unlike those industries in which women workers were a temporary, wartime phenomenon, women occupied a secure occupational niche in the electrical industry that actually expanded after the war in response to increased demand for small domestic appliances, radios, and televisions. Throughout the postwar period, women constituted between a quarter and a third of the electrical workforce,[10] a proportion that was also reflected in their union membership.[11]

The UE's attention to the interests of women workers was more than just an effective strategy, however; it was also a reflection of the union's politics. One of the first unions to sever its ties with the American Federation of Labor (AFL) in 1935 to create the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), the International UE had both a history of militancy and a reputation as a "Communist union."[12] The American government's anti-communist labour legislation, the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947, together with the targeting of UE leaders and activists by the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) facilitated the development of an anti-communist faction within the International UE that diluted the union's Communist tendencies.[13]

Like its American International, the UE's Canadian division, District Five, also faced anti-communism. Union leaders' refusal to moderate either their rhetoric or their militancy guaranteed acrimonious relations with such opponents as Labour

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neous Materials, "Employment and Earnings of Women in Canada"; UENA, 1946 District Five, Research Bulletins, *UE Research*, 1, 1 (April 1946).

[9]Royal Commission on Canada's Economic Prospects, 1957, Studies, 12, *The Canadian Electrical Manufacturing Industry*, by Clarence L. Barber (Ottawa 1956), 2-5.

[10]F.A. Knox, C.L. Barber, and D.W. Slater, *The Canadian Electrical Manufacturing Industry: An Economic Analysis* (Kingston 1955), Table 2.17, 40.

[11]Canada, Department of Labour, *Labour Organization(s) in Canada*, 1941-1955; UENA, 1944 Bulletins and Letters, Miscellaneous, "UE Locals and Organized Shops in Canada"; UENA, 1945 Government Correspondence, Department of Labour, Correspondence, 1947; UENA, 19th Annual Convention, Miscellaneous Materials, "Materials for UE Canadian 1955 Convention"; UENA, 1956 Government (Federal) Department of Labour Correspondence, "Canadian Department of Labour, Economics and Research Branch, Report on Labour Organization."

[12]Irving Martin Abella, *Nationalism, Communism, and Canadian Labour: The CIO, the Communist Party, and the Canadian Congress of Labour 1935-1956* (Toronto 1973), 44-53, 66-85, 168-87; Gad Horowitz, *Canadian Labour in Politics* (Toronto 1968), 24-8, 89-92; Richard O. Boyer and Herbert M. Morais, *Labor's Untold Story* (New York 1955), 350-70; James J. Matles and James Higgins, *Them and Us: Struggles of a Rank-and-File Union* (Englewood Cliffs 1974), 169-242.

[13]Kannenberg, "From World War to Cold War," 43-4; Schatz, *Electrical Workers*, 176-9.

Minister Humphrey Mitchell and Trade and Commerce Minister C.D. Howe, who was instrumental in the 1941 internment of Canadian UE President C.S. Jackson under the War Measures Act.[14] It also enraged powerful members of the labour establishment, who denounced the union publicly and engineered the UE's suspension from the Canadian Congress of Labour (CCL) in 1949. Indeed, the UE remained estranged from the mainstream institutions of the labour movement until its request for affiliation with the CCL's successor, the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), was accepted in 1973.[15] But, with the possible exception of Québec,[16] Canadian Communists were never subjected to the intensity of state harassment endured by their American counterparts, and UE District Five was able to withstand attacks from the right.[17] From its founding in 1937 until its merger with the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) in 1992, the Canadian UE maintained close and resilient ties to the Communist Party of Canada (CPC). All of its leaders and most of its activists either held Party membership or maintained less formal ties as fellow travellers and sympathizers. In concert with the CPC, the UE endorsed policies that identified class antagonism as the fundamental relation between labour and capital, and equality among workers, "regardless of craft, age, sex, nationality, race, creed, or political beliefs,"[18] as the cornerstone of working-class struggle.[19]

The advantages for women of this combination of pragmatism and principle became particularly evident at war's end, when government, business, and labour demonstrated a rare unanimity in endorsing women workers' expulsion from the workforce to make way for returning male veterans. Like much of the labour movement,[20] the UE had vigorously supported women's equal right to jobs at rates of pay equivalent to those of men throughout the war years. But while most unions abandoned their wartime demands for equal pay for women workers in the postwar period in favour of strategies intended to protect male jobs and wage levels, often

[14]UENA, "UE Canada: 40 Years," 13; UENA, "UE:20 Years of Progress," 18-19; Doug Smith, "The Defence of Canada: Civil Liberties during World War II," Transcript of *Ideas* Broadcast, 6-7 February 1991 (Toronto 1991), 17; William Repka and Kathleen Repka, *Dangerous Patriots: Canada's Unknown Prisoners of War* (Vancouver 1982).

[15]Abella, *Nationalism, Communism, and Canadian Labour*, 54-65, 106-10, 148-67; Caldwell, "UE," 62-74; Canada, Department of Labour, *Labour Organization*, 1941-72.

[16]See Merrily Weisbord, *The Strangest Dream: Canadian Communists, the Spy Trials, and the Cold War* (Toronto 1983).

[17]Terry Copp, *The IUE in Canada: A History* (Elora 1980).

[18]UENA, "District Five Constitution," 1947, "Preamble," 3.

[19]Abella, *Nationalism, Communism, and Canadian Labour*, 140, Bill Walsh, Interview, 12 November 1993.

[20]During the war, support for equal pay for women workers was almost unanimous. At its 1941 Annual Convention, for example, the Trades and Labour Congress reaffirmed its commitment to equal pay. See, Canada, Department of Labour, *Labour Gazette* (1942), 1043.

at the expense of female workers,[21] the UE stepped up its campaign for gender equality in the workplace in the mid-1940s. Suggesting that the government propaganda urging women back into the home had more in common with the fascism Canada had so recently struggled against than the democracy it had fought to preserve, the union proposed a policy of full employment — "jobs for all who need or want to work" — as an alternative to laying off women workers.[22] Speaking at public meetings, on community radio broadcasts, and in the daily press, UE activists argued that postwar unemployment, reduced wages, and housing shortages were not the fault of women workers, but rather the result of government policies that advanced the interests of business regardless of the cost to ordinary people.[23] Canada's hopes for "a lasting peace, rising living standards, and ever greater political freedom," they argued, depended on labour unity.[24] As a 1944 pamphlet, *To Win the Peace: The UE Plan for Canadian Prosperity in the Post-War* proclaimed, class unity — "no division between the war worker and the serviceman and woman" — was the most powerful weapon in workers' defence against "reactionary" capitalism.[25]

[21]Ellen Scheinberg, "The Tale of Tessie the Textile Worker: Female Textile Workers in Cornwall during World War II," *Labour/Le Travail* 33 (Fall 1994), 153-86; Pamela Sugiman, *Labour's Dilemma: The Gender Politics of Auto Workers in Canada, 1937-1979* (Toronto 1994); Shirley Tillotson, "Human Rights Law as Prism: Women's Organizations, Unions, and Ontario's Female Employees Fair Remuneration Act, 1951," *Canadian Historical Review*, 72, 4 (1991), 532-57.

[22]UENA, 1944 Toronto Layoff Conference Materials, "Brief from the Toronto Conference on Immediate and Post-War Employment to the Toronto City Council," 5; UENA, 1946 Press Releases and Letters to Editor, Press Release, 23 November 1946, "Union Leader Hits at 1947 Tax on Working Couples."

[23]UENA, Political Action, Local 512, correspondence, 13 December 1944; UENA, 1944 Kingston Office, correspondence, 18 December 1944; UENA, 1944 United Labour Committee on Immediate and Postwar Employment; UENA, 1944 UE News, Canadian Material, "Press Release," 29 September 1944; UENA, 1945 Local 512 Toronto (Composite), correspondence, 5 September 1945; UENA, 1945 Bulletins and Letters, Ottawa Delegation Re: PC1003, April 1945, "Memorandum to the Government of the Dominion of Canada"; UENA, 1945 PAC materials; UENA, 1946 Veterans' Welfare Committee, agenda and resolutions, 17 March 1946; UENA, District Council Meeting, 28 April 1946, minutes, "Resolution on Employment of Married Women in Industry," correspondence, George Harris to Premier George Drew, 6 May 1946, George Harris to Prime Minister Mackenzie King, 6 May 1946; Correspondence, D.R. Michener to George Harris, 31 May 1946; UENA, 1947 Radio Scripts and Speeches, "UE News on the Air," 6 March 1947, untitled radio script, 17 March 1947.

[24]UENA, [1945] District Five Annual Meeting, 19-20 October 1945, "Officers' Annual Report," 30.

[25]UENA, Pamphlet, *To Win the Peace: The UE Plan for Prosperity in the Post-War*, (Toronto 1944), 13.

Women's equality was construed, within this formulation, as both a matter of social justice and a prerequisite for class unity. This position was by no means unique to the UE. Women's specific and especial oppression under capitalism had long been integral, although not central, to the left's critique of class relations.[26] But, as Joan Sangster has compellingly argued, the CPC's expression of women's oppression in terms of the "woman question" within Communism located female inequality within class, rather than gender, relations.[27] The Party, moreover, proscribed political mobilization by women on the basis of their gender interests on the grounds that making common cause with middle-class women was misguided and erosive of class solidarity. UE leaders' and activists' exhortations to the membership to ignore distinctions between and among workers as largely irrelevant and potentially divisive echoed Party doctrine. Only by focusing on their common exploitation, they argued, could workers overcome employers' efforts to divide and weaken them and struggle successfully against the injustices of capitalism. Female unionism was thus legitimated by a construction of solidarity that identified women's interests as arising primarily out of their roles as workers and their membership in the working class, and denied that gender was a distinction that mattered.

On the one hand, the UE's argument that sex discrimination was simply an employer strategy to extract greater profits from working people's labour justified special efforts to recruit women and encourage their participation in the union. But on the other hand, it obscured unionists' recognition that union culture often appeared alien and hostile to women,[28] and that the commitment expected of union officers and staff was incompatible with women's maternal and domestic responsibilities. Consequently, while a number of women rose to prominence within the union, and a notable few earned reputations within the labour movement for their advocacy of women's equality,[29] women held disproportionately few positions

[26]The classic example is Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (London 1986, first published 1884). Equally venerable is Juliet Mitchell, "Women: The Longest Revolution," reprinted in Karen V. Hansen and Ilene J. Philipson, eds., *Women, Class, and the Feminist Imagination: A Socialist-Feminist Reader* (Philadelphia 1990), 43-73.

[27]Joan Sangster, *Dreams of Equality: Women on the Canadian Left, 1920-1950* (Toronto 1989).

[28]There is an emerging literature on the masculine culture of unions; for example, Patricia Cooper, "The Faces of Gender: Sex Segregation and Work Relations at Philco, 1928-1938," in Ava Baron, ed., *Work Engendered: Toward a New History of American Labor* (Ithaca 1991), 320-50; Elizabeth Faue, *Community of Suffering and Struggle: Women, Men, and the Labor Movement in Minneapolis, 1915-1945* (Chapel Hill 1991); Joy Parr, *The Gender of Breadwinners: Women, Men, and Change in Two Industrial Towns, 1880-1950* (Toronto 1990); Sugiman, *Labour's Dilemma*, esp. Chapter 2.

[29]"Evelyn Armstrong Inducted to Labour's Hall of Fame," *UE News Bulletin*, 2, 18 (6 May 1991); Linda Torney, President, Labour Council of Metropolitan Toronto and York Region,

within the union hierarchy and were significantly under-represented as delegates to union meetings and conventions.[30]

There is no evidence that women objected to this construction of equality in the period during and immediately after the war, although the records occasionally offer hints that women were concerned about the lack of female representation at union meetings and on local and national executive boards. In 1944, for example, Brida Gray, President of Local 514 and the sole female member of the District Executive Board, recommended the creation of a special fund to encourage women to take a more active role in the union by enabling them to attend annual conventions.[31] There is no evidence that any action was taken by the Board. By the late 1940s, however, an informal network of women had formed within the union that began directly to challenge the union processes and structures that privileged men and disadvantaged women, implicitly questioning whether their interests could be served by a construction of class unity that denied the relevance of gender.

Most of these women worked in shops where women constituted a majority of workers: large CGE plants like Toronto's Davenport Road, Royce Avenue, and Dufferin Street plants and Hamilton's Aerovox plant, as well as a number of smaller factories, like Toronto's International Resistance and Oakville's United Carr Fastener; or where there were large concentrations of female workers, like the giant Westinghouse plant in Hamilton, Peterborough's huge CGE plant, and Toronto's Amalgamated Electric and CGE Ward Street shops.[32] Ironically, the female-dominated shops where this critical consciousness took root were the product of an employer wage strategy that defined certain kinds of operations as work that only women could do.[33] Women workers, as a result, tended to be concentrated in

personal correspondence, 12 April 1994; "Des Lumieres dans la Grande Noirceur," film directed by Sophie Bissonette, Cinema Libre, Montréal, 1991; Nicole Lacelle, *Madeleine Parent Léa Roback Entretiens* (Montréal 1988).

[30]Between 1944 and 1955, women constituted an average of 13.5 per cent of delegates to District Council meetings and 11.7 per cent of delegates to Annual Conventions, although they represented about a quarter of the membership. UENA, 1944 Bulletins and Letters, Miscellaneous, "UE Locals and Organized Shops in Canada"; UENA, 1945 Government Correspondence, Department of Labour (Federal), "List of Shops Under Contract with Local Unions," December 1945; UENA, Government (Federal) Department of Labour, Correspondence, 1947; UENA, 19th Annual Convention, Miscellaneous Materials, "Materials for the UE Canadian 1955 Convention"; UENA, District Council Meetings, minutes, 1944-55; UENA, Annual Meetings and Conventions, minutes, 1944-55.

[31]UENA, District Council Meeting, 13 February 1944, Minutes, 19.

[32]Canada, Department of Labour, *Labour Gazette* (1946), 83; UENA, District Council Five, Miscellaneous Materials, 1946, "Employment and Earnings of Women in Canada." On women in Peterborough's CGE plant, see Joan Sangster, *Earning Respect: The Lives of Wage-Earning Women in Small Town Ontario, 1920-60* (Toronto 1995).

[33]Knox, Barber, and Slater, *The Canadian Electrical Manufacturing Industry*; Royal Commission on Canada's Economic Prospects, 1956, *The Canadian Electrical Manufacturing Industry*, 19. See also, Milkman, *Gender at Work*.

particular kinds of jobs, such as in the manufacture of light bulbs, radio and television tubes, winding the coils of electric motors, and in other similar operations.[34] In the absence of a union, these workers were acutely vulnerable to exploitation, succumbing to employers' demands for unpaid overtime, wage cuts, and other abuses.[35] As part of the UE, women turned their segregation to advantage, developing female support networks within their shops and electing women to positions on their local executives.

Although the records suggest that a relatively large proportion of female union members were both wives and mothers,[36] most of those who made a long-term commitment to union activism were neither. As in other unions, service to the union, whether in an executive position or as a member of the union staff, demanded enormous personal sacrifice and was normally incompatible with family responsibilities. Yet those women who were willing to make such sacrifices found within the UE the chance for lifelong careers as union activists. Some, like Evelyn Armstrong, long-time President of Toronto's CGE Local 507, President of the Toronto UE/GE Joint Board, and District Executive Council member,[37] and Léa Roback, business agent of Montréal RCA Local 531,[38] became outspoken advocates for women's rights, using their influence to push their union brothers toward a more gender-conscious vision of working-class struggle. Others, like the formidable Jean Vautour, staff organizer and sometime partner of UE President C.S. Jackson, endorsed a more orthodox view of the "woman question" in the union.[39] But whatever the differences in their interpretations of gender equality, their call for a larger role for women in the union was unanimous. Supported from behind the front lines by the efforts of UE Research Director Idele Wilson, who applied her organizing and research skills to expose the gender bias in the activities of both

[34]UENA, 1953 Annual Convention, Draft Minutes, 98; UENA, District Council Meeting, 14 June 1953, 5, 7; UENA, District Council Meeting, 19-20 June 1954; UENA, "Report on Women in Industry," (1954); Denise Thibeault, "Women Workers, the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of Canada (UE), and the Electrical Manufacturing Industry (1945-1955), undergraduate thesis, Queen's University, 1986, 17.

[35]Caldwell, "UE," 19-21; UENA, "20 Years of Progress," (1956), 8.

[36]UENA, 1955 Conference on the Problems of Working Women, Program, 9; UENA, 1957 Conference on the Problems of Working Women, Responses to Questionnaires; UENA, Publicity Department, Women, Miscellaneous Correspondence, 20 June 1962.

[37]Canadian UE News, 6 September 1989; Toronto *Globe and Mail*, 19 July 1962, "Women are Prepared to Take Active Role in Activities of Union"; Linda Torney, President, Labour Council of Metropolitan Toronto and York Region, personal correspondence, 12 April 1994.

[38]Léa Roback, Interview, 6 May 1993; UENA, 1947 Montréal Office, Correspondence, Léa Roback to Ross Russell, 14 April 1947; UENA, "UE Canada: 40 Years," 8.

[39]James Leech, Personal Correspondence, 28 November 1993; Bill Walsh, Interview, 15 November 1993; UENA, Applications for position as International Representative or Field Organizer, 2 April 1943; *Canadian UE News*, 6 June 1990.

employers and unionists,[40] these women created a strong female presence within the union. They were often frustrated by the inherent contradictions of the union's policy of deliberate indifference to gender difference, but the tension between the legitimacy they felt as union members and the invisible barriers they faced as women was a catalyst for the female gender consciousness that emerged within the union.

Separate Female Organizing

ONE OF THE FIRST INDICATIONS of this nascent feminism appears in the records of the Radio Tube Conference held by the union in 1945 and attended by 1115 delegates, all of whom, due to the gendered designation of the work, were women. The records of the conference indicate that the delegates discussed working conditions, wages, and impending contract negotiations, rather than gender issues, but their repeated references to their sex suggest an acute consciousness that, by engaging in such strategizing, they were breaching the normal limits of proper feminine behaviour. There is no indication, however, that they were ashamed of this transgression; on the contrary, they planned to announce it publicly in the form of a press release — "first time conference called on Radio Tube industry by girls" — and to recruit actively other women.[41]

The records are silent as to whether or not the women were able to sustain the momentum generated at this conference by holding the subsequent industry-specific conferences they proposed, but conference organizers Jean Vautour and Idele Wilson evidently recognized the advantages of such separate organizing for women. Due largely to the efforts of these women, the UE held a Conference on the Problems of Working Women in 1949, the first women's conference organized by any Canadian union.[42] Wilson and Leslie, aware of how the gender dynamics within the union silenced and marginalized women, restricted the conference to female delegates. As Wilson explained in a letter to UE activist Georgette Campeau, "We believe that [women] will find it easier to get up and talk in an informal type

[40]UENA, 1944 District Executive Board and Staff, Minutes and Materials, District Executive Board Meeting 25 June 1944, Minutes, 5; UENA, "W" Miscellaneous Correspondence, Mrs. M.L. Ackerman, Women's Association for Progressive Action, to Idele Wilson, 13 December 1945; UENA, 1947 Local 514 Toronto (East End Composite), correspondence, Idele Wilson to Mabel Fordyce, 22 September 1947; UENA, District Five Schools (Staff), [n.d.], "The Electrical Manufacturing Industry in 1948"; "UE's Idele Selected as Can. Labor Expert," *Canadian UE News*, 8 July 1949.

[41]UENA, 1945 Bulletins and Letters, Miscellaneous, January to July, "Radio Tube Conference," 30 September 1945.

[42]UENA, District Council Meeting, 30 April-1 May 1949, Peterborough, ON, "Press Release," 3 May 1949.

of meeting where they do not have to compete with the more vocal men to get an opportunity to speak."[43]

While the union's male leadership promoted the conference with a series of front page articles in the *Canadian UE News*, endorsing it enthusiastically as a vehicle to encourage women's participation in the union, men's and women's statements in support of the conference reveal divergent assumptions about the direction women's involvement would take. In one of the *Canadian UE News* articles published just prior to the conference, Wilson stressed the union's responsibilities to its female members, pointing out that "The job of ANY trade union is to protect the rights — jobs, wages, working conditions — of all the workers ... Working women are now (and have been for many years) an important part of the working population."(emphasis in original)[44] The purpose of the conference, she maintained, was to empower women to take an active role in shaping the policies and programs of the union: "Women have to establish their own place in the union. Women have to express their own ideas ... if every woman who comes as a delegate to our UE women's conference speaks even once afterwards in her own Local on some issues she considers important — and ALL the members really pay attention — then District Five will surely make greater strides than the ones we are proud of today."(emphasis in original)[45]

Wilson's belief that women had particular interests that, if integrated into the union's agenda, would significantly alter future policies, was not, apparently, shared by the national leadership, who adhered more religiously to the Party line on this issue. Director of Organization Ross Russell, who welcomed the conference delegates, explained that the purpose of the conference was to open women's eyes to the injustices of capitalism and encourage their participation in working-class struggle: "until now, there hasn't been enough of an understanding by the girls of what role they have to play in this struggle, and ... that is part of the reason for this conference." Discrimination against women, Russell told the delegates, was no different from racism, or discrimination against "foreigners"; it was a trick of the bosses who "use this prejudice question in order to get greater profits, for self gain of the big industrialists."[46] UE President C.S. Jackson, in his closing address to the conference, went so far as expressly to deny the relevance of gender, asserting that "it would be wrong to speak of this meeting as merely a conference of women — it is more correct, and I certainly feel very much at home in doing so, in speaking to this conference today, as a conference of representative union members from the

[43]UENA, 1949 D.C. Women's Conference, 18-19 June 1949, Toronto, ON, Miscellaneous Correspondence and Materials, correspondence, Idele Wilson to Georgette Campeau, 7 June 1949, 1.
[44]*Canadian UE News*, 17 June 1949, "UE Women Take Action," 1.
[45]*Canadian UE News*, 17 June 1949, "UE Women Take Action," 4.
[46]UENA, 1949 D.C. Women's Conference, 18-19 June 1949, Minutes and Reports, "Ross Russell," 3-4.

broad circles of membership that make up this great District of the UE."[47] Women, in other words, were encouraged to support working-class struggle, but were not expected to redirect it or to redefine its goals.

Although the official conference report warned members explicitly against "separatist tendencies which would only isolate women from the general function of the union,"[48] transcripts of the discussions among the 112 female delegates reveal that, in the absence of men, women did, indeed, feel able to include union men among the problems they faced as working women. Negotiating power relations with their male co-workers and union officers, encouraging militancy among other women, and evaluating the relative claims of married and single women's right to work were the principal topics discussed in the small group sessions of the conference. Flo Farrance, an activist from Local 524 in Peterborough, summed up the discussion among the delegates in her report to Idele Wilson: "men in the union do not seem to understand the girls['] problems and therefore do not fight for the girls. This gives the girls the tendency to feel they are not important enough for the men to bother about."[49]

This lack of support by the men, the delegates agreed, was a serious obstacle to women's union participation. Helen Driscoll, an activist from Local 514 and a worker at Toronto's Amalgamated Electric, pointed out that women "have [a] double struggle — [we] get encouragement in UE but still have to make [our] way in [the] Local as women. [Four out] of 10 delegates to District Council are women ... [and about five executive members are] women. But not because of particular help from men in the Local, rather in spite of it."[50]

Women also shared their experiences of female militancy within the union. Even without the support of the men, they agreed, they had earned their credentials as legitimate trade unionists. Several delegates pointed out that, in their shops, it was the women, rather than the men, whose determination had won important gains. The "men started the union, but it is the girls who keep it going," according to Aileen O'Brien of Local 515. Mary Stevens of Local 534 agreed: "[w]omen are the fighters in the shop. Foremen used to have [me] creaking in [my] shoes with sarcasm. Now [I am] determined to fight and get what we jolly well deserve. [I w]ill go back to fight, encourage the weak ones, and will get men's support."[51]

[47]UENA, 1949 D.C. Women's Conference, 18-19 June 1949, Toronto, ON, Miscellaneous Correspondence and Materials, Minutes, "C.S. Jackson," 1.

[48]UENA, 1949 D.C. Women's Conference, 18-19 June 1949, Minutes and Reports, "Report on District Five Women's Conference, U.E.R. & M.W. A.," 9.

[49]UENA, 1949 Women's Conference, Minutes and Reports, correspondence, Flo Farrance to Idele Wilson, 26 June 1949.

[50]UENA, 1949 Women's Conference, Minutes and Reports, notes taken of proceedings, [Saturday] afternoon, (n.p).

[51]UENA, 1949 Women's Conference, Minutes and Reports, notes taken of proceedings, [Saturday] afternoon, (n.p).

But they needed — indeed, they felt they were entitled to — the support of their local executives. Isobel Turner from Local 507 pointed out that the provisions in collective agreements meant nothing unless the (male) executive were prepared to back them up. In her experience, however, the women could not count on their elected representatives. Getting their rights depended on women "get[ting] hold of [the] president and insist[ing] [that the] thing ... be cleared up and real seniority fought for."[52] Many of the delegates agreed that women's energies were too frequently depleted fighting with the men in their shops rather than against the bosses.

Even with the support of other women, facing off against the men in the shop, or the local or district leadership, was a frightening prospect for most women. Although anxious to encourage the participation of the women, often men in leadership positions seemed insensitive in their dealings with them, and unaware of the imbalance of authority inherent in unequal gender relations. Evelyn Armstrong, a woman who assumed almost mythic status as a fighter in the UE, acknowledged how difficult she had found it to overcome her trepidation and speak up at union meetings. In a 1949 *Canadian UE News* article plugging the upcoming women's conference, Armstrong urged women to take a more active role in the union: "Too long we have been sitting back and letting the men do our thinking and talking — not because we lack ability — because we are often inclined to be self-conscious; and reluctant to take the floor at our union meetings." Armstrong described her experience in terms that foreshadowed later feminists' analysis of the unequal gender relations of mixed-sex discussions: "Here's one example: I know personally I have had what I thought was a good idea — but would hold back only to hear a Brother in the Local speak along the same line and put a good point across."[53]

Even the executive officers came up for a share of the women's criticism. Flo Farrance, in her report to Idele Wilson, identified union president C.S. Jackson as presenting a particularly bad example of abusive male power. In a local meeting evaluating the conference, Farrance informed Wilson, the delegates had only one criticism, and that was of their treatment by "one Brother Jackson." Indeed, "they felt that he had soundly slapped their wrists. Because they were a little new at the game and had made a mistake gave him no excuse to call them amateurs and company women."(emphasis in original)[54]

Following the 1949 women's conference, a series of setbacks directed the attention of the leadership away from the particular issues of women. The UE's hostile relations with the mainstream of the Canadian labour movement, and in

[52]UENA, 1949 Women's Conference, Minutes and Reports, notes taken of proceedings, Sunday afternoon, 2.

[53]*Canadian UE News*, 17 June 1949, "Step Forward, Union Girls!" 2.

[54]UENA, 1949 Women's Conference, Minutes and Reports, correspondence, Flo Farrance to Idele Wilson, 26 June 1949.

particular the leadership of the Ontario Federation of Labour and the CCL, resulted in the suspension of the UE's officers from the CCL's Executive Council in March 1949, and the expulsion of the union in July.[55] At the same time, all the left-wing Canadian UE delegates to the union's International Convention in the USA were refused entry into the US by American immigration officials, a move that effectively severed ties between the Canadian district and its American parent, while jeopardizing the re-election of the International's left-wing slate of officers.[56]

Meanwhile, the UE's companions on the left were also under attack. The International Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers Union had recently been suspended from the CCL, the combined forces of government, business, and the CCL were about permanently to cripple the Canadian Seamen's Union, and the CCL had formally withdrawn from the left-wing World Federation of Trade Unions. In addition, the Quebec Labour Board, under pressure from its own right-wing members as well as Premier Duplessis, was withdrawing the certification of the UE's Québec locals. Nor could the union look for help from its erstwhile social democratic allies. The UE, along with its friends in the Communist Party, was at loggerheads with the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), which was attempting to win the affiliation of CCL unions and officially establish itself as the "political arm" of the labour movement in Canada.[57] In the midst of all this furore, the "problems of women workers" were all but forgotten.

Although a number of women delegates participated in the discussions at district council meetings during the summer and winter of 1949, there is no evidence that either they or the UE's leadership directly addressed the concerns that had been raised by the delegates to the women's conference.[58] This inattention provoked a rebuke from one of the women at the union's annual convention in 1950 — the first public criticism of the union leadership by one of the women. Anne Amaolo, an activist from Hamilton composite Local 520, pointed out to the delegates, that "In the officers' report there is only one page devoted to women, and that is a graph, and no resolutions on women in the union. This is a serious mistake — it is essential that we give attention to the problems of women working in the industry and encourage their participation in the union."[59]

The union's 1951 convention attempted to address this oversight, passing resolutions denouncing Unemployment Insurance discrimination against women and calling for day care, publicly-funded recreational facilities for children, maternity leave, equal pay, and seniority rights for women workers. As part of a resolution on "Female Workers," however, the delegates voted against "the estab-

[55]UENA, District Council Meeting, 16-17 July 1949, minutes, 1-4.
[56]UENA, District Council Meeting, 16-17 July 1949, minutes, 9-11.
[57]UENA, District Council Meeting, 16-17 July 1949, minutes, 6-7, 11-4.
[58]UENA, District Council Meeting, 16-17 July 1949, minutes; UENA, District Council Meeting, 3 December 1949, minutes.
[59]UENA, 1950 Annual Convention, minutes, 11.

lishment of so-called women's departments in industry."[60] This position later became a point of contention within the union and was, indeed, symbolic of the different perspectives that developed within the union with the emergence of a stronger gender consciousness among the women.

In 1952, the International UE produced a 39-page pamphlet on women's status in the electrical industry, entitled "UE Fights for Women Workers," in which the union reaffirmed its commitment to win equal pay and seniority rights for women and to eliminate sex-specific job rates and categories. It also promised to advance women in the leadership structure of the union, to "give special attention to problems of married women growing out of family responsibility," and to "campaign for government-financed child care centres" and "eliminate discriminatory hiring practices."[61] At the union's annual convention that year, the officers of District Five recommended the pamphlet as required reading, and harshly criticized the Ontario government's equal pay bill, promising to struggle hard for improvements. As a minimum condition, Ross Russell told the delegates, "the top rate for females should be equal to the minimum rate for males. It is not our end objective," he assured them, "but it seems to be a fine immediate objective."[62] A need for a conference on the specific problems facing women was expressed by some of the delegates, and the officers agreed to organize another women's conference.[63]

Despite these promises from the leadership, however, there is no evidence of a concerted effort by the union to address the problems of the women during this period. In the absence of action on the part of the national executive, the women started to organize independently. By February 1953, women from the Toronto and Peterborough CGE shops had convened a number of local conferences intended to encourage women to share their concerns and develop solutions to their particular problems. Evelyn Armstrong, who addressed the meeting as both an Executive Board member and a delegate from Toronto CGE Local 507, told the February District Council meeting that, although the turn-out of women to these meetings was small, the women who came expressed deep disappointment in the inaction of the "many people [who] made great speeches and went back to their locals and did nothing."[64]

A few of the male delegates laid the blame for this on the women workers, contending that they "tried to get the women interested," but that "the women are not fully aware of the inequalities ... and do not understand how they are being exploited." "Our greatest problem," one male delegate opined, "is how to activate the girls." Ivy Riley, a delegate from Local 514, disputed this analysis of the problem and offered an alternative explanation: "I feel we need a lot more guidance

[60]UENA, 1951 Annual Convention, minutes, 7, 10-1, 29-30.
[61]"UE Fights for Women Workers," 39.
[62]UENA, 1952 Annual Convention, transcript minutes, 4, 49.
[63]UENA, 1952 Annual Convention, minutes, 12, 17, 18, 23, 34-5.
[64]UENA, District Council Meeting, 21-22 February 1953, transcript minutes, 9-10.

from the District .... I do feel that the District should call a meeting, and that we have a discussion on a program for such a meeting." Joe Spence, who was a member of Riley's local and also Idele Wilson's partner, supported Riley's position and suggested that not only the leadership, but also the rank-and-file men were responsible for this neglect. "The participation of the men ... inside the shop is a big lack," Spence offered. "The participation of women in our local is very good."[65]

By October 1953, when the union held its annual convention, the women had begun working together in informal, separate female groups, and were ready to propose an alternative construction of the "woman question" in the union. Helen Driscoll, a delegate from Toronto Local 514, told the assembly, "We had a little meeting of the women in UE and we started to get to the bottom of what is the question .... Many of the delegates still feel that the woman question is something apart and in a little slot ... I certainly feel that this is very wrong."[66] Her sentiments were echoed by another delegate from the same local, Ivy (Riley) Harris: "I want to stress the importance [of] the fight for women ... it isn't [just] a fight for women, it is a very serious problem .... We have to take it off the level of being a woman's problem and realize that it is a problem for everyone in this union."[67] Evelyn Armstrong concurred: "We are not asking special favours. We are asking to be treated with decency. We are not a special problem, we are part of the whole union problem."[68]

The male delegates and officers at these meetings, with very few exceptions, regularly condemned the exploitation of women workers and pledged to support union struggles for women's equality. But their arguments, reflecting those advanced by the male leadership and activists, conflated their own, gendered interests with the interests of the membership as a whole, thus erasing the distinctly different perspective on equality expressed by the women. Indeed, transcripts of the discussions suggest that, while both men and women endorsed the principle of equal rights, they understood the problem differently. The men, almost without exception, articulated their support for gender equality in the language of class unity, urging the women to join with them in collective struggle against the abuses of the employers, and particularly against their own exploitation. Women's passive acceptance of lower rates and higher production quotas, whether on 'women's jobs' or on 'men's jobs' that had been reclassified and given to women, male delegates argued, was a problem for the whole union. In their own interests, and in the interests of their male co-workers, women were urged to fight back and demand fair treatment. The argument made by Bob Stevens, a delegate from Local 515 to the union's 1953 convention, typified this position. Stevens suggested that union men should be working through the year to instill "a fighting spirit [in] the girls,"

[65]UENA, District Council Meeting, 21-22 February 1953, transcript minutes, 10-1, 14.
[66]UENA, 1953 Annual Convention, transcript minutes, 93.
[67]UENA, 1953 Annual Convention, transcript minutes, 96.
[68]UENA, 1953 Annual Convention, transcript minutes, 99.

so that when the local went into contract negotiations with the company, "we can force a decent rate on these jobs."[69]

Forcing the employers to pay women wages equal to men's represented, for the men, both the achievement of gender equality and the uniting of workers' interests in collective struggle. Men's and women's interests converged, delegate George Rigby suggested to the union's 1953 convention, in the demand for an end to discriminatory wage rates, which not only exploited women's labour but "were a menace to the men's rates." The men in his local, Rigby told the convention, had won a higher minimum rate for female employees, but women's rights had not been their primary concern. "When we tackled this problem," Rigby candidly explained, "the men did it for a very selfish reason" — to protect their own rates.[70]

Male leaders and activists construed the fight for equal pay for women workers as consistent with the interests of all union members by arguing that it was also a fight to protect male jobs. Lower wages for women, E. Campbell argued at the 1954 convention, encouraged companies to replace men with cheaper women workers, who not only worked for less, but, "because of a girl's ability to do ... a job faster [could] turn out production at least twice as fast as that turned out by the man on the [same] job."[71] Not only was speed-up deleterious to women's health, Bob Stevens suggested in support of this motion, but the "low wages paid to our women workers gives the company even greater incentive to break down men's jobs more and more and give them to girls."[72] Equal pay for women was thus represented, by the male delegates, as the obvious solution to two problems: mobilizing the women in their own self-defence, and protecting the prerogatives of male workers.

Arguing for equal pay on the basis of union solidarity was particularly, and perhaps uniquely, successful in the UE because the deeply entrenched and long-standing division of jobs according to sex secured women's place in the electrical manufacturing workforce. In other industries, where women were a minority of workers, and where the gender designations of jobs were easily reclassifiable, unions sometimes opted, instead, to oust the women, thus removing the threat of wage degradation and creating more opportunities for male workers. Pamela Sugiman details several instances of United Auto Worker (UAW) locals that deployed this strategy in her recent study of the gender relations within the Canadian UAW.[73] In the UE, where women were both numerous and secure, the existence of a lower-paid cohort within the workforce acted as a brake on everyone's wages. Even without the ideological endorsement of women's equality

[69]UENA, 1953 Annual Convention, transcript minutes, 96.
[70]UENA, 1953 Annual Convention, transcript minutes, 97.
[71]UENA, 1954 Annual Convention, transcript minutes, 107.
[72]UENA, 1954 Annual Convention, transcript minutes, 101.
[73]Sugiman, *Labour's Dilemma*, 127-34.

insisted upon by the UE's Communist leadership, it would have made strategic sense to support equal pay for women workers.[74]

Women unquestionably benefitted from the UE's position on gender equality in the workplace. The union's almost legendary willingness to strike in support of higher wages and better benefits, and its insistence that wage increases and benefit packages apply equally to male and female workers, resulted in tangible gains for all members. Periodically, the UE made a determined effort to narrow the gap between male and female wages, and on at least one occasion, persuaded male workers to accept a smaller rate increase in order to bargain a proportionately larger increase for women.[75] By the mid-1940s, the UE could boast a smaller gender difference in wages than existed in most other unions.[76] UE women who continued to work after marriage also fared better than many of those in other unions. Because married women constituted a significant proportion of the UE's membership,[77] and since one of the most outspoken advocates of women's rights within the UE — the redoubtable Jean Vautour — was herself a mother,[78] the debate over married women's entitlement to seniority rights was never as contentious as it became in many other unions.

Women's relative advantage as members of the UE fell far short, however, of the promised equality. Although support for equal pay was the central pillar of the UE's campaigns to recruit women as members, its achievement was a rare and isolated exception, rather than the rule, in plants under UE contract. Indeed, the vast majority of UE women achieved equal pay only after legislation prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sex was passed in 1970, the result of an intensive lobby in which UAW women (although not UE women) played a prominent part.[79] Union men's unselfconscious equation of their admittedly "selfish" interests as men with the collective good, and the refusal to acknowledge or accommodate differences between and among union members, furthermore, underwrote a definition of class unity that justified sacrificing women's particular interests when

[74]Ruth Milkman argues that strategic advantage, and not Communist principles, motivated the UE's qualified support for equal pay for women workers. See, Milkman, *Gender at Work.*

[75]Thibeault, "Women Workers, the UE, and the Electrical Manufacturing Industry," 24-5.

[76]Canada Department of Labour, *Wages and Hours of Labour in Canada, Annual Reports*, 1940-70; UENA, District Council Five, Miscellaneous Materials, 1946, "Employment and Earnings of Women in Canada"; UENA, 1955 District Five Conference on the Problems of Working Women, Fact Sheet No. III.

[77]No reliable data on the proportion of married and unmarried women are available for the period before the 1950s, but in 1955, the UE's officers estimated that about one-third of the female membership was married. See, UENA, 1955 Conference on the Problems of Working Women, Program, 9. Frequent references in the UE's literature to women as primary and contributory breadwinners both before and throughout this period further suggests that married women were a noticeable presence in the union.

[78]James Leech, personal correspondence, 28 November 1993.

[79]Jill Jones, Interview, 27 July 1995; Sugiman, *Labour's Dilemma*, 165-7.

they conflicted with those of men. Unionists' principled adherence to gender blindness was mediated by unchallenged assumptions that placed male breadwinners at the centre of union policies.

The UE's commitment to gender equality was severely tested, and found wanting, over the issue of seniority rights. As an abstract principle, union leaders fully supported women's right to equal seniority. In practice, however, not only union leaders, but workers of both sexes were often resistant to allowing a woman to take a man's job, simply because she had more seniority. The legitimacy of women's right to equal seniority was even more questionable in the case of married women. Union leaders argued vigorously in favour of undifferentiated seniority in principle, but the authenticity of these arguments was undermined by their evident reluctance to endorse married women's entitlement to jobs. At the union's 1954 convention, Ross Russell supported married women's right to seniority in decidedly equivocal terms, arguing not that they were just as entitled to seniority rights as any other worker, but solely in terms of union principles. "The moment we start tampering with [seniority rights] ... the moment you open this question to the bosses," Russell pointed out, you sacrifice the principle of indivisible seniority, and it becomes possible for the employer to negotiate relative seniority rights on the basis of skill, age, marital status, and even skin colour. "[In] the interests of each and every one of us in the shop," he enjoined the male members, "we should be prepared to fight on this question, because we are not fighting for the married women, and let's understand that once and for all ... [but] in our own self interest."[80]

Apparently unwilling to see male workers laid off in order to preserve abstract union principles, men and leaders alike failed to make equal seniority rights or the elimination of the sex-specific job classifications that prevented women from "bumping" into men's jobs bargaining issues.[81] Separate job categories and separate seniority lists persisted in plants organized by the UE until the late 1970s, when they were challenged by women workers newly armed with equal opportunity legislation. And even then, according to Jill Jones, who was an active participant in these fights, only a small minority of men actually supported women's efforts to achieve workplace equality.[82]

Gender Consciousness and the Fight for Women's Rights

FRUSTRATED by what they regarded as inadequate advancement toward the objective of gender equality, women activists launched an independent campaign for equal rights in the early 1950s. Unlike the UAW women described by Sugiman who, similarly frustrated, developed informal, parallel structures within the union,[83] UE women insisted that gender equality was an essential aspect of working-

[80]UENA, 1954 Annual Convention, transcript minutes, 113.
[81]See, Sangster, *Earning Respect*, 339-40; Thibeault, "Women Workers."
[82]Jill Jones, Interview, 27 July 1995.
[83]Sugiman, *Labour's Dilemma*, 98-136.

class struggle and therefore a legitimate concern of union men. Fighting to have their concerns recognized as important, indeed, crucial union issues, they explicitly challenged the leadership's articulation of the "woman question" in the union. Speaking out at annual conventions, where union policy was debated and adopted, women delegates argued that gender difference was far from irrelevant. On the contrary, they told the men, women workers' experience gave them superior insights into the problems they encountered in the workplace because of their sex. As Evelyn Armstrong explained to the convention delegates in 1954, "the girls are the people who are the victims of this kind of thing, and are the people who can best explain the situation and fight it."[84] Using arguments that combined gender consciousness with a call for solidarity, women delegates pointed out that women workers were exploited by lower hourly rates, incentive bonus schemes, speed-ups on the production lines, and unfair motion time studies (MTS), all of which extracted additional labour from women at reduced cost to the companies. Employers, furthermore, took advantage of women's timidity and vulnerability to discourage them from seeking union protection. Labour unity, and indeed, real manliness, they suggested, dictated that the men make good on their promises of support and lead the fight for women's rights in the workplace.

The leadership's policy of promoting gender equality and public advocacy of women's rights, the women delegates contended, had proved inadequate to solve the problem of women workers. "Even to this [1953] convention," Helen Driscoll pointed out in her opening remarks on the resolution for "Equal Pay for Equal Work," "we had [only] two resolutions on the [woman] question out of the whole District ... [and] material wasn't available to bring the question to the [stewards'] school." One reason for this oversight, Driscoll suggested, was that the local executives had failed to ensure that women had a voice within the locals by encouraging women to take leadership roles or finding places for women representatives in committees.[85] When union issues are defined by groups comprised only of men, Driscoll observed wryly, their proposals "seem a little subjective," reflecting solely a male viewpoint.[86] Men, she suggested, tended to interpret the issues differently than women. Indeed, in response to the position taken during this discussion by Ross Russell, who argued that there were only "workers in the plant, not women and men,"[87] Driscoll countered, "There are differences. Biological differences."[88] Union men, she implied, had a responsibility to take these differences into account.

Men and women activists also expressed divergent views on whose responsibility it was to lead the fight for equal pay and equal rights for women. Men usually

[84]UENA, 1954 Annual Convention, transcript minutes, 103.
[85]UENA, 1953 Annual Convention, transcript minutes, 72.
[86]UENA, 1953 Annual Convention, transcript minutes, 100.
[87]UENA, 1953 Annual Convention, transcript minutes, 100.
[88]UENA, 1953 Annual Convention, transcript minutes, 100.

described their role as supportive, as Bob Stevens did in 1953: "the women ... are going to have to put up a fight themselves .... It's up to our stewards ... to show our girls how to fight[.] [O]nce we show them and give them a little leadership we won't have any trouble getting the girls to put up a fight for themselves. There will be no holding them down."[89]

The women delegates rejected this argument, contending that not only were men not providing the promised support, but that the fight for women's rights was the responsibility of the entire union membership. May Dart, a delegate from Local 521, told the 1954 convention that, in her shop, women were subjected to abuse and exploitation by the foreman because they lacked the "encouragement and help [of] the men."[90] Evelyn Armstrong concurred: "The feeling I have and a lot of the girls have is that we are being sort of patronized. Everybody agrees that equal pay is a fine thing, but nothing is being done." Women became active in the union, Armstrong argued, despite the lack of support from the men. "The girls who are active, they fight their way forward on their own."[91] Margaret McCoombes from Local 507 agreed: "We need the backing of the men ... as well as the women in all of our fights, which is something we don't always get. Too often, when we start to fight[,] we get slapped down."[92] Vi Hastings, from Local 520, had the same view: "I agree with Sister Armstrong, you don't play ball with us — men don't support the women."[93]

In implicit challenge to the men who supported the policy of equal pay and opposed the exploitation of women out of what was admittedly their own self-interest, the women delegates argued that real labour unity demanded that the men take responsibility for leading the fight for women's rights, rather than offering, as Evelyn Armstrong expressed it, only "lip service to this question." "The delegates," Armstrong charged at convention in 1953, "don't seem to be taking the thing with their teeth." The men had been shirking their responsibilities as unionists, she contended. "All we look for is leadership and help. We can't be expected to do it alone .... The bigger percentage of our union are women and they deserve the help that you people can give them."[94] Men's failure to support the struggle for women's rights was not only indicative of a failure of solidarity, Ethel Knight suggested to convention in 1954, but raised questions about their masculinity. "We don't call them men in our shop," Knight informed the delegates, "we call them Minos ... 'Men in Name Only'."[95] Indeed, popular opinion notwithstanding, militancy was not a gender-specific characteristic, according to Charlotte Shorthill, a Feranti worker from Local 525 who pointed out, "when it has become necessary to take

[89]UENA, 1953 Annual Convention, transcript minutes, 76.
[90]UENA, 1954 Annual Convention, transcript minutes, 115.
[91]UENA, 1954 Annual Convention, transcript minutes, 103.
[92]UENA, 1954 Annual Convention, transcript minutes, 104.
[93]UENA, 1954 Annual Convention, transcript minutes, 114.
[94]UENA, 1953 Annual Convention, transcript minutes, 99-100.
[95]UENA, 1954 Annual Convention, transcript minutes, 104.

job action in the shop the women are ... a hell of a lot more militant than the men."[96] Even some of the men agreed with this assessment of their failure. Joe Spence from Local 514 told the 1954 convention, "most of us realize that for a number of years we have been paying lip service to the woman question." But despite his self-critical tone, Spence's proposals echoed those that the women activists had already found to be inadequate: "I believe that if we ... encouraged women to take a position in the union we will find they will solve many of the problems."[97]

The divergence between women activists' articulation of the "woman question" and that of the male activists and leaders was nowhere more apparent than in the struggle at the union's 1953 and 1954 conventions over the UE's support for the proposed Women's Bureau of the federal Department of Labour. In preparation for the 1953 convention, Local 514, a composite local covering several medium-sized electrical plants in Toronto, including Amalgamated Electric, from which many of the feminist contingent originated, submitted a resolution endorsing the establishment of a Women's Bureau within the Department of Labour. The union's Resolutions Committee, however, which revised and prepared resolutions for presentation to convention, deleted the endorsement. The resolution that appeared at convention, calling for "Equal Pay for Equal Work," included a substitute provision urging locals to lobby for the Fair Employment Practices Act — which was seen primarily as anti-racist labour legislation — to be amended to include language barring discrimination against women.[98]

Ross Russell, speaking for the national officers, argued in defence of this decision on the basis of class unity. Russell explained that allowing the government to establish a separate department for women would divide the workers, thus "playing into the hands" of their class enemies. "We have workers in the plant, not women and men. We are all workers. We have to fight for this position that women are the same insofar as wages and these matters are concerned and what we are trying to achieve is precisely that, equality for women."[99]

Helen Driscoll, Evelyn Armstrong, and Ivy Harris challenged Russell's contention that recognition by the union of gender difference would undermine class unity. On the contrary, Driscoll argued, "It is[,] I think[,] a question of unity .... I would recommend that [support for the Women's Division] be a part of our fight and it is our responsibility to raise the fight throughout Canada."[100] Ivy Harris told the delegates, "it isn't [just] a fight for women ... it is a problem for everyone in the union."[101] Armstrong recommended that "a [women's] committee [be established] in every local," pointing out that it was not the role of "a ladies' auxiliary

[96]UENA, District Council Meeting, 19-20 June 1954, transcript minutes, (n.p.).
[97]UENA, 1954 Annual Convention, transcript minutes, 105.
[98]UENA, 1953 Annual Convention, transcript minutes, 94-5.
[99]UENA, 1953 Annual Convention, transcript minutes, 100.
[100]UENA, 1953 Annual Convention, transcript minutes, 100.
[101]UENA, 1953 Annual Convention, transcript minutes, 76.

to deal with these problems," but the responsibility of the whole union.[102] Driscoll moved to amend the resolution to include the original motion of support for the Women's Division, and it carried as amended.[103]

In 1954, although the male leadership was still insisting that there was "not a bit of difference" between the problems of women workers and any other union issue,[104] the women activists were actively pursuing a campaign of raising gender consciousness within the union and forging feminist alliances between UE women and other women's groups. At the 1954 convention, Helen Driscoll reported that she, Jean Leslie (Vautour), and Evelyn Armstrong had formed a small delegation and gone to Ottawa to meet with Marion Royce, the newly appointed Director of the Women's Bureau. Royce, Driscoll admitted, was clearly a privileged woman who had probably never "seen the inside of a factory" and was "not used to approaching things in the manner that women who work in industry have to."[105] Having established that Royce did not qualify as an ally on the basis of shared class interests, Driscoll assured the delegates that an alliance had nonetheless been established between Royce and the UE women, and briefly outlined their program for working from "below" to expand the scope of the Department. Indeed, not only had they forged an alliance based on their common interests as women, despite the lack of a shared class experience, but the UE women, Driscoll explained, had plans for further female coalition building. "We will have to join with other organizations, trade unions, and other groups such as the Business and Professional Women[,] and it will be up to us to get unity on this question and take more initiative."[106] Unity, indeed — but a unity based on gender, rather than class interests.

The balance these women activists had achieved between gender consciousness and unionism proved difficult to sustain, however. Prodded by the women to stand by their promises of support, and reminded that "part of the weakness [of the union] in the past has been that it was considered a women's problem rather than a union problem," the national executive took a directive role in organizing the next women's conferences, held in 1955 and 1957.[107] But male support, although necessary if the women's issues were to achieve recognition as mainstream union concerns, came with a price. Union leaders continued to define the problem in terms of class, rather than gender, inequalities, and this perspective was reflected in the issues that appeared on the conference agenda. Even more explicitly, the material provided for delegates to the 1955 conference stated, "This conference is not a

[102]UENA, 1953 Annual Convention, transcript minutes, 99.
[103]UENA, 1953 Annual Convention, transcript minutes, 100.
[104]UENA, 1954 Annual Convention, transcript minutes, 113.
[105]UENA, 1954 Annual Convention, transcript minutes, 116-7.
[106]UENA, 1954 Annual Convention, transcript minutes, 117.
[107]UENA, 1954 Women Members, Circular Letters and Correspondence, Jean Vautour to C.S. Jackson, 9 September 1954.

women's conference, but a Union conference. It is called by the Union to deal with the particular problems of one very important section of our Union, our women members."[108] And although the organizers assured delegates that they "need[ed] to hear from the women who are attending this conference ... what they think are the main problems of the women in our shops," the dynamics and the organization of the conference discouraged women from identifying their union brothers as part of the problem.[109]

The officers' priorities were also different from those of the women who had organized the 1949 conference. While acknowledging that "[t]here are many problems which working women face which differ from those of male workers," the officers were concerned only secondarily with women's rights. Most importantly, they asserted, "unless and until we begin to show more concern for these respective problems we will not succeed in uniting these women behind the union."[110] Jackson acknowledged that the officers had been "extremely negligent ... giving not much more than lip service to the important issue involving the women members in our union," but construed the reason for addressing these issues as "building greater unity of both women and men behind the general fight against the company," rather than correcting the inequities created by gender discrimination.[111]

Indeed, women delegates were repeatedly reminded of their common class interests, and even encouraged to question the value of alliances based on gender. In his closing remarks to the 1955 conference, C.S. Jackson told the delegates that "the union is the only instrument through which they can hope to get redress of their grievances, and win improvements in their wages and conditions of work."[112] In contrast to the unthreatening environment of the all-female 1949 conference, the records of the 1955 and 1957 conferences suggest that the presence of male business agents and local officers in discussion groups silenced women and undermined gender consciousness. In his report to conference secretary Jean Vautour, UE organizer and discussion group recorder Tommy Davidson stated that, in his group, "one male delegate said he strongly opposes married women working during periods of unemployment. It seemed to me that the women delegates were not prepared to argue with him." Nor, apparently, were any of the men prepared to speak in their defence. The women's primary concerns, moreover, were relegated to a mere postscript in Davidson's report. Belatedly noting this omission, Davidson

[108]UENA, 1955 Conference on the Problems of Working Women, "UE District Five Conference on the Problems of Working Women," 2.

[109]UENA, 1955 Conference on the Problems of Working Women, "UE District Five Conference on the Problems of Working Women," 2, 15.

[110]UENA, 1955 Conference on the Problems of Working Women, circular letter, C.S. Jackson to Local Secretaries, 10 August 1955.

[111]UENA, 1955 Conference on the Problems of Working Women, circular letter, C.S. Jackson to Area Representatives, 14 July 1955.

[112]UENA, 1955 Conference on the Problems of Working Women, Minutes, 6.

added, "I forgot the main point which was made by the delegates[,] especially the women. They believe there should be a great deal more Local leadership. They feel the Local leaders should spend more time on women[']s problems in the shop and give leadership on how to elect stewards, take up grievances, call meetings for women members, etc. I believe this was the main point made."[113]

The redirection of the women's conferences away from gender issues was reflected in women members' declining interest in these conferences. In 1957, conference organizers Evelyn Armstrong and Tom Campbell sent a circular letter to the union's area representatives, suggesting that "the reason why past Conferences have not been as successful as they should have been is because the issues around which the Conferences were called and the discussion around them were not reflective of the thinking of women working on the job."[114] But the delegate attendance at subsequent women's conferences, and the relative absence of a feminist critique of union policies, suggests that these efforts were rewarded with only marginal success. Although 112 women had attended the 1949 conference, only 49 women and 35 men attended the 1955 conference; 66 women and 26 men attended the 1957 conference; some 80 women and 20 men attended the 1962 conference; and 56 women attended the 1967 conference, out of a total membership averaging about 20,000 of which between 3,500 and 5,000 were women.[115]

Nor did the gender analysis that inspired the women activists' challenges to their union brothers influence the mainstream union discourse, and union literature continued to define women's issues in terms that minimized or ignored the problem of unequal gender relations among union members. A circular letter to delegates to the 1962 conference, for example, noted that "women workers have some problems which differ from those of the male workers," and recommended "separate meetings for the women" in order to "encourage them to become more active in the overall life of the union," but not to facilitate the development of gender consciousness.[116] Even a 1991 Policy Statement on sexual and racial harassment issued by the UE's Human Rights Committee, which acknowledged that such problems could arise within the union, rather ambiguously advised members to

[113]UENA, 1955 Conference on the Problems of Working Women, notes on discussion group five, (n.p.).

[114]UENA, 1957 Conference on the Problems of Working Women, circular letter, Evelyn Armstrong and Tom Campbell to Area Representatives, 30 January 1957.

[115]UENA, 1955 Conference on the Problems of Working Women, Minutes, "Who Attended"; UENA, 1957 Conference on the Problems of Working Women, "Delegates"; UENA, Publicity Department, Women, Miscellaneous, Circular Letter, C.S. Jackson to Delegates Attending Women's Conference *et al.*, 20 June 1962; UENA, Material Related to Royal Commission on the Status of Women, 1968, "UE Women's Conference, 25 June 1967."

[116]UENA, Publicity Department, Women, Miscellaneous, Circular Letter, C.S. Jackson to Delegates Attending Women's Conference *et al.*, 20 June 1962.

"put our policies straight and fight for our rights as united UE members who know who our enemy is, not be side tracked to fight each other."[117]

The absence of any significant gender analysis in even the most recent policies of the UE suggests that the gender consciousness that was evident in the arguments of women activists in the late 1940s and early 1950s remained a submerged discourse, and was never integrated into the policies or rhetoric of the union. But sisterly solidarity, although discouraged by the leadership's insistence on a class consciousness that could not accommodate opposing gender interests, did not entirely disappear. Indeed, by the 1960s, UE women activists were not only publicly aligning themselves with the renascent mainstream feminist movement, but articulating a much needed, working-class perspective on gender relations.

This class-conscious feminism is evident in the UE's brief to the Royal Commission on the Status of Women, prepared collaboratively by the fifty-six women delegates to the UE's 1967 Women's Conference, at the suggestion of the Women's Committee, which included veteran unionist Evelyn Armstrong.[118] Drawing on a wealth of experience informed by decades of gender-conscious struggle within the union, they enumerated a wide range of issues that had particular significance for wage-earning women, from labour legislation to reproductive rights. In terms that would now be characterized as socialist feminist, they called on the Commission to endorse the International Labour Organization's convention on equal pay for equal work, argued against the inequities of the gender division of labour in the workplace as well as the educational, attitudinal, and legal structures that perpetuated that division, and urged remedial legislation to give working women equal access to unemployment insurance benefits, including paid maternity leave. They advocated, as well, government-operated, industry-funded child care, extension of the grounds for divorce, and legislation making abortion and contraception both a matter of personal choice and available without cost to those in financial need. The submission paid particular attention to the needs of sole-support mothers, urging supplements to widows' pensions for each dependent child and advocating levies on non-custodial parents (assumed to be fathers) who failed to pay child support.

Their proposals for legislative and social changes to advance the status of women addressed both the discriminatory assumptions implicit in notions of gender difference and the ways in which working women were especially disadvantaged by the structural inequalities of class. The social injustices perpetuated by capitalism, the submission suggested, were inseparable from those created by hierarchical gender relations. They argued, moreover, that gender was not only largely culturally constructed, but that it was constructed in the interests of capital.

[117]UENA, 1991 Policy Statement, UE Human Rights Committee, "Are We Really Brothers and Sisters?" 6-7.

[118]UENA, *Material Related to Royal Commission on the Status of Women*, 1968, UE Women's Committee Meeting, minutes, 31 May 1967.

Public education had become the willing, if unwitting, slave of capital, through the adoption of curricula that trained, rather than educated people, in order to prepare them to "occupy ... position[s] that [have] been determined by the dominant forces in society." This (mis)education, together with various social institutions, traditional family structure, and women's primary responsibility for domestic work, lay at the heart of women's secondary status in the workforce. The ideology of female inferiority, however, obscured material and attitudinal barriers to women workers, permitting employers to pay them lower wages and deny them benefits and opportunities for advancement on the basis of gender differences that had been taught.[119] This was not simple discrimination, they suggested, but something far more insidious. Quoting sociologist Oswald Hall, they concluded that it was "naive to assume that major changes in the division of labour between women and men can occur without some massive accommodations at not only the psychological and cultural levels, but at the level of the major institutions of the society."[120]

Conclusion

AS ONE OF THE LAST ONTARIO UNIONS with a political culture animated by Communism's vision of an egalitarian society, and committed to class struggle, the UE unflinchingly embraced unpopular policies in the name of social justice. In just such a spirit did the union proudly proclaim itself one of the foremost advocates of women's rights in the Canadian labour movement. Ironically, the very politics that underwrote the union's unusually progressive position on equality obstructed women's attempts to extend the definition of workers' interests to include the gender relations that shaped women's experience of the union and the workplace. Union leaders' orthodoxy tied them to a one-dimensional view of class that precluded validation of the various aspects of identity out of which their diverse membership was constituted. In the name of solidarity, differences were subsumed beneath an overarching, unilinear definition of class interest that rested solely on workers' exploitation under capitalism, and rendered gender, like all other constituents of identity, incidental if not completely irrelevant.

The UE's policies in regard to women workers rested on a principled gender neutrality that dictated a deliberate indifference to the sex of the worker. In some cases, particularly those in which women were blatantly discriminated against in wage levels and working conditions, this was an effective strategy, but it did little to expose the pervasive sexism that undermined women's claims to workplace equality by defining "female" skills as inherently less valuable than men's and women as contributory, rather than primary, breadwinners. Similar contradictions

[119]UENA, Material Related to Royal Commission on the Status of Women, 1968, "Submission to the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada, Presented by United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE), February 1968," 8-17.
[120]UENA, "Submission to the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada, 1968," 27-8.

defined women's roles in the union. Although the leadership constantly urged women to seek union office, and male staff engaged in much breastbeating over the consistently low female enrolment in leadership training schools run by the union,[121] union men almost invariably attributed the small proportion of female union activists to either personal choice or women's natural reticence, rather than to the inherent gender bias of union structure and culture.

Union men endorsed limited reforms intended to place women, along with people of colour and members of religious and ethnic minorities, on an equal footing with white, Anglo-Saxon men. But they saw overt discrimination, rather than institutionalized power, as the problem. Women's critical interpretations of their union experience underwrote a divergent analysis of the nature of the problems faced by women workers and the relation between gender and class oppression, one in which their exploitation as workers and their oppression as women were inextricably linked. Activist union women were, moreover, acutely aware that unequal gender relations, in which both their employers and working-class men were implicated, lay at the heart of the problem.

Refusing to choose between gender and class, UE women activists straddled two worlds. Sufficiently empowered by the union's rhetoric of gender equality and women's rights to collectively challenge the union leadership's directives, women activists had, by the mid-1950s, forged alliances with a wide range of women's organizations, both left-wing community groups, of which union leaders approved, as well as middle-class organizations, of which they did not.[122] Union men's fears that such alliances would undermine the women's commitment to class struggle appear, however, to have been unfounded. Although activist women appealed repeatedly for wholesale reform of gender relations, including those within the union, they continued to endorse working-class unity, even when identifying themselves as class warriors diminished their credibility among their less class-conscious allies.[123] And despite their evident frustration with the gender politics within the union, they remained fiercely loyal to their union brothers.

But union men were unable, or unwilling, to share their vision. Through the ensuing decades, the UE continued to endorse the principle of gender equality, but made slow progress. The UE's failure to live up to the promises made to its women

[121]UENA, Educational Classes, "UE-CIO School 1944"; UENA, [UE] Summer School [1945]; UENA, 1947 Summer School; UENA, District Leadership School 1952, "Estimation of District School, Submitted by P[eter] Hunter"; UENA, District Five School, 1953, correspondence, 11 August 1953; UENA, District Five School 1955; UENA, District School 1957, correspondence, 14 May 1957.

[122]UENA, 1945 Annual Meeting, Resolutions Adopted, "Community Work," 6; UENA, 1946 "S" Miscellaneous Correspondence, circular letter from Stewart Smith, Controller, Toronto Board of Education, 10 September 1946; UENA, 1951 Annual Convention, transcript minutes, 9; UENA, 1952 Annual Convention, Minutes, 35-7; UENA, 1954 News Releases, 1 July-31 December, "Press Release," 5 March 1954, 1.

[123]Barbara Cameron, Personal Conversation, 9 April 1994.

members, and its inadequacy as a vehicle for advancing women's rights, are at least partially attributable to its leaders' tenacious adherence to an outdated and inflexible ideology of class struggle that could not accommodate the complex and conflicted realities of workers' gendered lives.

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