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Connecting Women with Unions

What Are the Issues?

ANNE FORREST

This paper investigates the role of “women’s issues” in the decision to join unions by examining a successful organizing drive in a predominantly female workplace. The main focus of the discussion is the identification of women’s issues where they were not immediately apparent to workers and union representatives. The theoretical question raised by this case study is the extent to which women workers’ relationship to unions is similar to or different from men workers’. Contemporary industrial relations discourse tends to emphasize the similarities between women and men, without taking into account well-documented differences in women’s paid and unpaid work and union experiences. From a feminist perspective, the conclusion that gender is unimportant in organizing campaigns often rests on an inadequate analysis of what constitutes women’s workplace/union issues.

Academic discussions about the place of trade unions in the “new economy” tend to be bleak in tone. Many of us are dismayed by the decline in union membership—sharp in some countries, less so in others—and believe the prognosis for a quick turn-around is poor. In all industries, workers face employer schemes to shift the production of goods and services to the lowest-cost provider. Technological change, subcontracting and outsourcing have led to a steady loss of “good jobs” in manufacturing, transportation, and natural resources. Together with efforts to slim and trim public sector employment and privatize government services, these

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changes have directly undercut the strongholds of post-war unionism. Work in the new economy is more likely to be temporary, part-time, part-year, or on the worker's own account, thereby increasing the proportion of traditionally "hard-to-organize" workers among the unorganized.

Amidst this doom and gloom, the growing affinity between women and unions is a hopeful exception. Whereas thirty years ago union density among women was significantly lower than among men, today, employed women in Canada are almost as likely as employed men to belong to a union.¹ Sometimes mislabelled as a by-product of high union density among public sector workers (e.g., Craig and Solomon 1996)—what Yates (2000) described as "passive" union joining—this phenomenon crosses industrial and occupational lines. That women are actively seeking union representation is evidenced by their higher levels of membership in the fastest growing areas of employment—small establishments, part-time and temporary jobs, and private-sector services (Akyeampong 1999)—and by higher rates of success in organizing drives in bargaining units in which women predominate (Yates 2000; Bronfenbrenner and Juravich 1998).

How to build on this strength is a matter of debate among academics concerned with union renewal. Everyone agrees that unions must pay greater attention to women workers and that organizing practices rooted in the past must be changed. Some of the advocates of "union-building" organizing strategies have found that women workers often take longer to commit to the union than men and that women are more responsive to the union message when they can engage in one-on-one and small group discussions (e.g., Crain 1994; Hurd and McElwain 1988). But this research has not led to calls for gender-particular recruitment campaigns.

The central theoretical question in this debate is the extent to which women workers' relationship to unions is similar to or different from men workers'. Well into the 1980s it was not uncommon for studies of union growth to conceptualize women workers not as workers but as women whose over-riding concerns were construed to be home and family, not paid work. For many scholars (Forrest 1993), it was self-evident that the future growth of the union movement was severely limited by the rapid increase in women's labour force participation. This "saturation school" assumption was so widely accepted in the discipline that many studies (both macro and micro) employed gender as an explanatory variable without any discussion whatsoever.² Others justified the use of gender as an independent

1. In 1970, fewer than one in four employed women was a union member compared with almost two in five men (Zukewich 2000: 106). In 1999, union density among women was 29.3 per cent; among men 30.9 per cent (Akyeampong 1999).

2. Fiorito and Greer (1986: 149) observed that "in most studies a dummy variable for gender is entered or justified almost as an afterthought."

variable reciting the well-rehearsed, but little-investigated, arguments that unionization was less cost-effective for women because they were only temporarily attached to the labour force or because they considered their wages to be a supplement to the family income. Some even argued that women should be excluded from the union density equation altogether on the grounds that “they are either ‘unorganizable’ or that their organization is not ‘essential’ to the trade union movement” (Bain and Price 1980: 7³).

The idea that women were invariably “hard to organize” became untenable once researchers adopted more sophisticated statistical tools. Notwithstanding the fact that union density remained lower among women, studies of union growth that utilized regression analysis revealed that gender was rarely a statistically significant variable. Using time-series data from eight countries, Bain and Price (1980: 168) showed that patterns of union growth among women mirrored those of men. Similar findings have been reported by researchers engaged in micro-level studies. In their comprehensive study of the literature, Wheeler and McClendon (1991: 64) concluded that individual-level research “has revealed no relationship between *gender* and propensity to vote for union formation” (emphasis in the original). Also telling were data from surveys of workers’ attitudes which indicated that women, today, may be more inclined to join unions than men (e.g., Freeman and Rogers 1999; Schur and Kruse 1992).

In place of the old theory, which tied propensity to unionize to gender, we see, today, the rise of an analysis which says that gender does not matter—at least, that is the implication when researchers do not reveal the gender composition of their sample (e.g., Wheeler, McClendon and Weikle 1994) or disaggregate their data by gender (e.g., Godard 1997). More common is a finding that women report the same reasons as men for seeking union representation. From their study of a clerical workers’ organizing drive, Hurd and McElwain (1988: 361) concluded that women’s issues “are seldom central to a clerical organizing campaign...[and that] traditional trade union issues predominate.” More persuasive are the survey data reported by Waddington and Whitston (1997) and Freeman and Rogers (1999). Based on large samples of British and American workers, respectively, both research teams reported finding no gender-based differences in attitudes towards work or reasons for seeking union representation.

The belief that women workers are just like men is likely to be consolidated (in North America, at least) with the publication of *What Workers Want* by Freeman and Rogers (1999). This extensive and well-grounded study⁴ of private-sector workers’ views about their jobs, employers,

3. Note, however, that Bain and Price (1980) argue against this position.

4. In addition to focus groups with 56 workers in six occupational groups, the Worker Representation and Participation Survey included two waves of data collection: the first,

and unions purports to be the “voice of American [and Canadian?] workers” (p. 2), which the authors state is uninflected by gender. Their central finding—that a sizeable proportion of American workers want more say on the job, often, but not always, in the form of union representation, and the likelihood of this being the case is greater when workers believe that management is not trustworthy or is unwilling to share power—applied to both women and men (p. 82). Based on focus groups, in which women workers met separately from men workers, Freeman and Rogers (p. 19) concluded:

The first lesson was that sex and race are less important in talking about one’s job than is occupation. Gender might matter in many areas of discourse, but when it came to workplace issues, the major variation in attitudes among these people was by occupation rather than by demographic characteristic. Female blue-collar workers had similar concerns to male blue-collar workers...The only demographic factor that mattered considerably was that blacks in all fields of work favored unions more than whites.

Notwithstanding these conclusions, Freeman and Rogers provided *prima facie* evidence of gender differences. Of the non-union, non-managerial workers responding to wave 1 of the Worker Representation and Participation Survey, 35 per cent of the women but only 27 per cent of the men said they would support a union in a representation vote (p. 71). In the absence of information about the statistical significance of this difference the reader can only conclude that women may have had a higher propensity to unionize than men. Also suspect is their conviction that occupation was the primary determinant of workers’ attitudes. In fact, workplace characteristics were no more likely to predict a person’s willingness to vote for a union in a representation election than were personal characteristics (p. 84).⁶

a twenty-six minute national survey of 2,308 employees; the second, a fifteen-minute follow-up survey of 801 respondents to the wave 1 questionnaire (Freeman and Rogers 1999: 37).

5. To investigate whether their finding that American workers prefer co-operative labour-management relations was particular to the United States, the Worker Representation and Participation Survey was administered to 1,000 Canadians, “making it the largest such survey conducted up to that time in Canada.” The results were generally similar, the reader is told; however, the data are not provided (Freeman and Rogers 1999: 35-36).
6. “Workplace characteristics were a set of three dummy variables for whether workers were very, somewhat, or not satisfied with their influence on workplace decisions; two dummy variables for whether they participated in an employee-involvement program or were in a company with a program; three dummy variables for the quartile of their weekly earnings; and one dummy variable for those who did not report earnings...Personal characteristics were a set of dummy variables for five age groups..., for two race groups..., for sex, and for five education groups” (Freeman and Rogers 1999: 84).

Clearly, the move away from a theory that tags women workers as reluctant trade unionists by nature (or nurture) is of great importance for both women and the study of industrial relations. Yet, it is hard to be confident about a theoretical model that implicitly denies the importance of well-documented differences in women's work and union experiences. Of the studies discussed above, none engages with the abundant feminist scholarship on the subject of women and unions. Whereas feminist scholars put issues of the "double day," job segregation by gender, and low pay for traditional women's work at the centre of their analysis of women and unions, these issues are all but ignored in conventional industrial relations research. Likewise for Canadian industrial relations textbooks: none of Pearce (2000), Godard (2000), or Gunderson, Ponak, and Taras (2001) considers whether or how women's particular experiences as workers or unionists might affect the decision to unionize. All give the impression that only modest changes in union practice, for example, including certain women's issues on the bargaining agenda, are needed to convert women from outsider to insider status.

Feminist scholarship begins with the premise that "women enter unions differently from men because of their workplace locations and their household/family responsibilities" (Briskin 1999: 82), and that these differences present a profound challenge to male-based union practice. There is extensive evidence of women's inferior terms and conditions of employment and their collective efforts to make change. Warskett (1996), Briskin (1999), White (1993, 1990), and others have described the multiple ways that women workers in Canada have come together as women to broaden the scope of their unions' bargaining agendas and to make their unions structurally more accountable to women members. Also well-documented are union women's efforts to advance issues of special importance to them through strike action (e.g., Briskin and Newson 1999; McDermott 1993; White 1990) and provincial and national campaigns for legislation to correct longstanding discriminatory workplace practices (e.g., Sugiman 1993; Cuneo 1993).

The fact that many unions have instigated internal reforms in response to women's demands is testament to the growing recognition among union leaders, male and female, that women members are not well served by a "one size fits all" model (e.g., Chaykowski 2001; Briskin 1999; Warskett 1996). But feminist research has had little influence on mainstream industrial relations thinking. From her recently published review of industrial relations journals and textbooks, Wajcman (2000: 183) concluded that "although some progress has been made, gender issues remain marginal to much of the current research agenda. While feminist scholarship has reshaped the social sciences, it has made surprisingly few inroads into the

field of industrial relations—this despite the feminization of the paid labour force, one of the most important social changes in the twentieth century.”

On the evidence, conventional industrial relations inquiry fails to fully analyze the gendered dimensions of labour-management and worker-union relations. Considered from a feminist perspective, the conclusion that gender is unimportant often rests on an inadequate analysis of what constitutes women’s workplace/union issues. Hurd and McElwain (1988: 362) concluded that women’s issues were not important in clerical worker organizing drives because specific issues such as child care or pay equity were not raised during campaigns. Yet, they inadvertently underscored the salience of gender as a workplace issue when they reported that clerical workers tended to view unions “as institutions dominated by angry groups of male employees” and that organizing drives directed at women clerical workers must pay “more attention...to building self-confidence.” Similarly problematic are the conclusions of Freeman and Rogers (1999), Waddington and Whitston (1997), and Godard (1997). In these studies, participants were asked to respond in a restricted way (e.g., yes/no, a lot/somewhat/only a little/not at all, and so on) to questions framed by conventional theory and posed at a high level of generality. For example, the survey conducted by Waddington and Whitston (1997) asked workers to identify their reasons for joining a union from a list that included “support if I had a problem at work” and “improved pay and conditions,” with which women workers could agree even if they had in mind their particular problems as women. We should also be cautious of Freeman and Rogers’s (1999) finding that women workers meeting in focus groups failed to volunteer women’s issues. It is at least arguable that focus group organizers attuned to traditional industrial relations discourse could not hear the women’s issues embedded in the discussion (see Crain 1994: 243).

That industrial relations thinking about women and unions has slipped seamlessly from a “pre-feminist” to a “post-feminist” theoretic, that is, from a model of sharp gender difference to one of gender similarity, is a less thorough-going change than it seems. Both approaches apply theories of union growth and attachment developed by studying men to women, with the result that women’s reasons for joining unions have been investigated only insofar as their union-joining behaviour replicates that of men. The possibility that women workers might have distinct reasons for joining (or avoiding) unions has never been fully considered. If accepted as industrial relations orthodoxy, the view that women workers are just like men threatens to close off an investigation of gender differences before it has seriously begun.

This article investigates the role of women’s issues in the decision to join unions by examining a successful organizing drive in a predominantly

female workplace. The main focus of the discussion is the identification of women's issues where they were not immediately apparent to workers or union representatives. Following a brief description of how the study was conducted and the data were analyzed, I present the participants' reasons for supporting the organizing drive in their workplace in two parts: "Why Join the Union?" and "Were Women's Issues Important?" The former is a standard industrial relations account of these women's reasons for organizing; the latter offers a reinterpretation based on a more subtle reading of their concerns. The next section, entitled "Defining the Issues," discusses why the women's issues underlying these workers' discontent were less than obvious to the workers themselves and to the union organizers assigned to this location. In the final section, I draw some conclusions about the importance of understanding the gendered dimensions of women's work and union experiences for theory-building and practice.

HOW THE STUDY WAS CONDUCTED

This article reports and analyzes interview data gathered from women workers and union representatives who, together, successfully organized an auto parts packaging plant in Windsor, Ontario, Canada. The company is a family-owned firm of 120 employees and 50 to 75 casual workers hired through a temporary help agency as needed. The union, though male-dominated, is seeking to broaden its membership base beyond blue-collar, manufacturing workers and under-going significant internal reforms to support this process. At the time of the study the casual workers were not represented by the union, which failed in its bid to have them included in the bargaining unit despite winning a strike.

This research site was chosen because one of the organizers thought I would be inspired by the "really strong women" she had met over the course of the campaign. And she was right. These workers, over 80 per cent of whom were women, took on a determinedly anti-union employer, achieved certification, and won a three-week recognition strike—something that is not supposed to happen in Canada's system of compulsory collective bargaining. The company was well-known in Windsor for its anti-union attitudes and did everything it could to preserve its managerial prerogative unfettered. "We were in a strike over fundamental recognition issues," the union staff representative reported. At issue were "the right to file grievances and so on—seniority—basic stuff that, like I say, shouldn't be that much of a problem." Union victories in "hard-to-organize" workplaces of this sort are essential if union representation in goods production and handling is to recover from its long-term decline.

The data reported here were gathered in one to one-and-one-half hour, semi-structured interviews with ten women—nine permanent employees

(that is, roughly one in ten of the women in this group) and one temporary worker—conducted during the winter of 1999, one year after the first agreement was signed and about two years after the organizing drive began. Participants were asked to describe their (paid) work histories, what they liked and disliked about their jobs past and present, the division of household labour in their families, and what they thought about the union organizing drive. (Also discussed in the interviews but not reported here were their experiences as strikers.) The women were recruited using a snowball sample, which began with the two women workers who led the organizing drive, the negotiations, and the strike. Most participants were workplace friends; however, at least three were recruited because I asked to speak to women who had not been firmly committed to the union from the outset. In general, those interviewed roughly mirrored the women in the permanent work force at the time of the organizing drive in its range of age, seniority, family circumstances, and commitment to the union. All appeared “white,” a fact they said reflected their employer’s racial bias and which set them apart from many of the casual workers hired through the temporary help agency.

I also interviewed the three union organizers who worked on the organizing drive and the union’s staff representative who was responsible for negotiating and enforcing the collective agreement. From the organizers, I was able to obtain copies of the leaflets distributed during the campaign; from the staff representative, I received a copy of the collective agreement. Appended to the agreement was a list of all permanent employees at the time the agreement was signed (April 1988) with their job titles, job classifications, hourly wages, and dates of hire, which allowed me to determine the gender composition of the permanent work force (87 women and 29 men), the gendered nature of job assignments, and gender-based pay differentials discussed below. In two or three cases, I was forced to make an educated guess as to the gender of the individuals based on their first names.

All of the interviews were transcribed *verbatim* and analyzed in light of the commonly known features of women’s work: job segregation by gender, low pay for traditional “women’s work,” the “double day,” and persistent sexual harassment (Zukewich 2000; Johnson 1994). The leaflets and collective agreement were similarly analyzed. In the discussion that follows, I have reported as wide a range of viewpoints as seemed practical in an article of this length and took care to include the full range of the participants’ points of view. I attempted to check the accuracy of my version of events by sending an earlier draft of the paper to all of those I had interviewed. To date, no one has responded to my invitation to discuss these matters further or to make changes. An unusual aspect of this project was

the eagerness of the two lead organizers to be quoted by name. On reflection, however, I decided to err on the side of protecting their privacy so assigned pseudonyms to all participants.

WHY JOIN THE UNION?

The women interviewed for this study saw themselves as workers committed to their jobs (whether or not they like them very much) and permanently attached to the labour force. All felt that economic self-reliance, or the possibility of it should the need arise, was an important personal goal. Some have or said they would take time out for child-rearing, others not; some would prefer part-time work, others not. But when asked if they would quit work altogether if they could afford to, most seemed doubtful. "I've always worked," was a common response, supported by personal histories of paid work that began as young teenagers.

As workers, their reasons for supporting the organizing campaign were those reported in the literature: in Beth's words, "fairness and your job security and the way you were talked to." Their collective sense that they were not treated fairly was a sharp and well-articulated grievance. For Susie, "the major issue was the mistreatment of employees, you know, the favouritism, the harassment." Joining the union made sense given their many years of service for an employer that actively practised "bad management." In a number of cases, the decision to join (or, in one case, to initiate the organizing drive) followed a personal experience that underscored their vulnerability in the absence of clearly defined rules and procedures. Money was a second-order motivation. Low by comparison with women in general, wages in this workplace were average for women in materials handling occupations (Lindsay 2000: 155). "Well, we wanted more money," Nicole explained, "but we knew it wasn't a big factor. It was mostly just the fairness and respect that we wanted."

Favouritism headed their list of complaints. Managers were free to "pick and choose" who got what, with important ramifications for individuals. By all accounts, personal connection determined who got hired, promoted, time off, etc. Because connections mattered more than work experience, one young woman was hired directly into a permanent job while others with longer work histories were redirected to the temporary employment agency and so were paid minimum wage, instead of \$10-\$11 per hour plus benefits. Nor was it obvious why some agency workers were eventually hired into permanent jobs while other were not. Some were hired on, Louise said, "after only being there a month and some were hired after being there a year," and some not at all—no one could predict. "Heaven knows the criteria there," was Martha's response when asked.

Better-paying jobs were reserved for friends of management regardless of seniority. Teresa complained that a job would be posted “and they would give it to whom they wanted to give it to. Somebody had ten years; somebody had one year and they liked the person that had one year, they would get the job.” According to Beth, the human resources manager “brought in all her buddies” then assigned them to areas where they could learn higher paying jobs. Consequently, when job openings were posted they were more qualified than others with many more years of service who were “still on the floor packaging.” “If you know somebody that’s in management, you’re guaranteed to move up real fast.”

If there were policies and procedures, the women I talked to did not know about them. Before the union, “it was a deal where, you know, you were friends with the supervisor,” Carolyn explained. “They would get you to do something for them that you didn’t really want to do, but you’d do it but in turn you would get something back, you know.” According to Annette, “Certain people get picked on more for this or that while other people get away with stuff and, you know, getting asked for overtime and getting overlooked accidentally.” Rules were invented on the fly and applied inconsistently. Vicky described an incident in which she was told to wear her safety glasses: “And I said, ‘Well, I’ve never worn safety glasses. I never needed...’ She [supervisor] goes, ‘That’s the rules,’ And I said, ‘I never knew that.’” Louise observed that “One person would ask for a day off with, you know, they just wanted to go out of town. The company would let them. One person would ask for an extra day off because they had a death in the family and they wanted an extra day off and they wouldn’t give them the extra day off. So it was—they picked and chose who they wanted all the time for anything.” “That was another unfairness,” she added. “Somebody would take a day off because they weren’t feeling well—‘Well, you have to bring a [doctor’s] note.’ But somebody else took a day off and they didn’t have to bring a note.”

Management had no concept of progressive discipline equitably applied. “One person would get a three-day suspension for something stupid...but yet another person would do the exact same thing and because of who it was they get a slap on the hand. Like, it was totally unfair,” Beth complained. Everyone agreed with Nicole that “people get fired for no reason.” “They could let you go at any time without any explanation,” according to Carolyn who saw a co-worker dismissed this way. Packers felt particularly vulnerable because they were held responsible for the job performance of temporary workers. “If it does get screwed up,” Susie said, “her name is not going to be the one that’s pulled into the office and, you know, ‘You messed this job up,’ it’s me.” Having run afoul of management, Nicole reported that she was “brought into the office, screamed and yelled at and sent out crying and—you name it.”

All of these women defined themselves as “good workers” so were shocked when they were personally affected. Susie’s response was typical, “If that could happen to me it could happen to anyone.” Accused (unfairly) of improper behaviour, Susie and two others felt convicted before the investigation began. “We were under the impression that our jobs would be terminated because of this and they made us wait for three weeks every day going into work and not knowing if you’re going to have your job the next day...I had heard stories but I have never thought in a million years it would happen to me.” “Boy, that could be my—my job,” Beth thought after a shop committee meeting in which she was told that she had “no legal rights to represent any people there, and they had no legal rights, and the company could do what they wanted to do—to anybody...They could just have me out that door so fast...That night I got in my car and I drove to the union hall.”

According to these women, the company cultivated the image of itself as a caring employer, calling on workers to be part of the “family,” adopt the “team spirit,” and take advantage of the “open door policy,” but did not practice what it preached. In their view, management’s attitude was, “If you don’t like it, there’s the door.” “You had no choice, you know, no say, no nothing—in anything,” Nicole recalled. Carolyn found that management was unwilling to make shift changes, even for something as worthwhile as school. “This company is not for you,” she concluded. “They don’t want you to better yourself.”

There were many stories of poor communications. “When they change a spec or when they change a work order description, tell the people,” Beth said, exasperated. “Don’t wait until they’ve done it the way they’ve always done it and then get—and then come out and give them a non-performance and say, ‘You did it wrong.’ We’re getting charged for this.” She continued, “One person will come and do one thing, another person will walk by and say you’re doing that wrong, you should do it this way. So you stand there and then you’ve got the other person coming up to you and saying, ‘Well, why are you standing there?’” When problems arose, Susie chose not to call on management. “I wouldn’t even bother to approach the company about it because it wouldn’t be heard. They wouldn’t listen.”

When asked what would make her job better, Nicole said, “more respect;” Louise’s answer was even more cogent: “new management.” This was a common refrain. The marked absence of a culture of respect for workers as people left them exposed to the peccadilloes of each manager’s personality and, by these women’s accounts, many were downright abusive. It was not uncommon for managers to order workers about, scream instructions, or fly into a rage when mistakes were made. “There’s some

of them that, like, just really rage right out, like, they get all—like, this one guy, he gets really yelling and shaking, pointing his finger at people and stuff like that,” Annette said. Nicole thought managers were contemptuous of workers’ skills and abilities. “They make you feel like you’re down, you know, like you’re not in their level...They treat you like you’re a dummy or something,” she explained. To protect herself from managerial abuse Martha adopted an outwardly tough, “don’t mess with me” attitude but felt that women who really needed their jobs couldn’t afford to be so self-assertive. There were many stories of women reduced to tears and unable to speak up for themselves for fear of losing their jobs.

WERE WOMEN’S ISSUES IMPORTANT?

From what was said, it would be easy to conclude that gender was not an important factor in this organizing campaign. Indeed, this is what the union organizers believed. When interviewed, they argued that gender was irrelevant in this, and every, organizing drive. From their point of view, women and men alike join unions for “worker” reasons—chiefly, job security, fairness, and dignity—which are not gender specific. And, to some extent, this is what the women themselves said. Most denied the presence of gender discrimination in their workplace and were uneasy with the concept of what are commonly referred to as women’s issues in collective bargaining. When asked to describe what they thought about their employer, all reported problems of favouritism, abusive management, uncertain job security, and (to a lesser extent) low wages: that is to say, the reasons commonly cited in the literature. Like the workers responding to the Worker Representation and Participation Survey (discussed above), the women in this study said they chose union representation because management did not listen to employees’ concerns, seemed indifferent about their welfare, and refused to share decision-making power.

Notwithstanding the legitimacy of the standard interpretation, I argue that an alternative reading of the situation is possible. Gender discrimination was a fact of life in this workplace and a number of the women I interviewed reported various aspects of this reality. Intertwined with their complaints about unfair treatment, precarious job security, and oppressive management were reasons for joining the union grounded in their particular experiences as women workers. Embedded in some women’s explanations for why they joined the union were complaints about blocked access to better-paying jobs, low pay for “women’s work,” problems associated with their “double day,” and experiences of gender-based forms of harassment, that is to say, the very issues we know shape women’s lives on the job in Canada as a whole. They did not use the term “women’s issues:” their overarching complaint was that their employer was unfair, not that it

was unfair to women. And, unlike the workplace problems described above, there was no coherent statement of these problems. What some women saw, others did not. Of the generally recognized problems confronting employed women, job segregation by gender and scheduling difficulties related to their roles as wives and mothers were more visible; the undervaluing of “women’s work” and gender harassment much less so. In sum, no woman mentioned every issue but every issue was discussed by at least one woman.

For a number of the women, it was self-evident that they were not afforded the same job opportunities as men. When asked what the union should do for women, Nicole replied, “Fairness when a job posting is up and a man and woman applies, they don’t automatically take the man.” Beth pointed to the under-representation of women among fork lift and jitney drivers as evidence of this practice: “The fork lift driving, it was being mostly given to the males—any of the higher position jobs. We only had, like, two fork lift drivers, women.” “When I started there it was pretty well all women that packaged and any other classification, like, on the fork lift or what—shippers, receivers—they were men,” Louise explained. Men were more likely to get the better-paying packaging jobs, as well. One night, when she was assigned to package heavy parts, Louise demanded the extra pay for the job and was moved to a different table. “I wasn’t allowed to do the heavy parts,” she recalled. Under the new collective agreement, there is no premium pay for heavy packaging, which a number of women thought was unfair to the male packagers who are still more likely to be assigned these parts.

Despite the fact that four out of five employees were female, women were all but excluded from the higher-paying jobs and overwhelmingly concentrated at the bottom of the pay scale. More than 90 per cent of women employees held jobs in the lowest-paying classification, materials processor, and 77 per cent were employed in the lowest-paying job of packager. Men, by contrast, dominated the better-paying materials handler, janitorial, and maintenance classifications which, together, accounted for three-quarters of the jobs held by men but only one woman’s job. Expressed somewhat differently, of the twenty-two workers who earned \$12 or more per hour when the collective agreement was signed in 1998, seventeen were men (three of whom were red-circled as a result of collective bargaining) and five were women, that is, 60 per cent of all male employees but less than 6 per cent of all women employees earned what, in this plant, was a premium wage. And contrary to what two of the women thought, seniority did not explain this outcome: of the twenty most senior employees, fifteen were women, and eleven of them were still packaging after ten years of service.

There was, as well, a sharp, gender-based pay inequity. The packager job—that is, the job performed by three out of four women—was the lowest paid job in the plant, despite its centrality to the firm's business. Many of the women thought the job was boring precisely because it required traditional women's skills of dexterity, co-operation, and patience. In fact, much more was demanded of these workers. Given the company's heavy reliance on casual workers, packagers who were permanent employees were really team leaders who spent the majority of their time training, organizing, and supervising others—functions that were difficult given the high rate of labour turn-over among agency workers and the high proportion of newly arrived immigrants whose English was limited. Vicky described her job this way: "Well, we have to assign the [agency workers] a job either making boxes or wrapping parts or putting them in or stapling. And we have to make sure that they're doing it right because we'll get in trouble if it's not done right. And we have to figure all the paper work. We have to read the specs to make—to see what we have to do. We have to go in the computer and make out the tags and figure out skid configurations for the boxes. They have to go on a certain way on the skid and call the supervisor—chase the supervisors around if we have problems, get QA [quality assurance]. We have a lot of jobs to do."

Given these responsibilities, the job was stressful. Packagers routinely worked at tables where they were the only employee who could perform the entire job, yet, were held accountable for the quality and speed of everyone's work. "All [agency workers] can do is the packaging," Louise explained. "They just stand at that table and they can only do the packaging. Everything else, you have to do, and if there is a mistake, it doesn't come back on them, it comes back on you." The job was hard, Beth said, "because there's people out working on these lines, they've got to train these people and yet they've got to meet spec, they've got to meet production, they've got to meet—all this. You can't do it when you're the only person, you've got five new people on that's in there." "A bunch of us started complaining," Louise reported. "It's just too hard. You don't ever want us to stop. You're telling us they [agency workers] can't stand around—well, that's just too bad. They have to stand there while I finish up this job because they don't know how to do the next job."

None the less, these complaints were not translated into a claim for higher pay by most of the packagers I interviewed. When I asked about wage discrimination, I was told that it was unfair that casual packagers earned considerably less than their full-time counterparts. I heard no "equal pay for equal work" argument on their own behalf. No one argued that full-time packagers deserved their higher wage. Rather, they tended to accept the conventional wisdom that packaging was an unskilled job in

relation to, for example, fork lift driving. And the idea that their jobs might be undervalued because it was thought of as “women’s work” never surfaced. Only Vicky made the case for a wage increase based on equity. “We’d like more money,” she said, “or take some of this work load off of us because it’s, you know, we’re worth more than that. We’re doing all that work. Yeah, we are supervisors and we are, we’re secretaries, too.” But the job’s skill and complexity were largely invisible to other workers. Indeed, on two occasions, the “equal pay for equal work” principle was employed by others seeking a higher wage on the grounds that their jobs—processing work orders and making boxes—required more mental skill than did the job of packager.

More visible as an issue of particular concern to these women were the difficulties some experienced getting time off work for child-care. Their expectations were modest. All of the women who had or were planning to have children considered child-rearing a private matter to be handled by them with help from their extended families. Over time each woman had developed her own solution to the family-(paid) work conflict. Nicole and Martha described divisions of household labour that left the majority of the work and responsibility on their shoulders in deference to the male breadwinner. But Louise, who also labelled herself a secondary earner, described her struggles over a period of years to engage her spouse more actively in child-care and housework. Her determination to secure his active contribution meant that, at the time of the interview, he was fully responsible for feeding, cleaning up after, ferrying, and bedding their children when she worked afternoon shift. Most remarkable to me was the solution devised by Susie and her ex-husband. Their daughter lived with her mother when Susie worked days and her father when Susie worked afternoons, with occasional help from her mother and brother who lived across the road.

Continued employment with this firm would have been impossible if women workers could not draw on the help of other family members as needed given the high cost of formal day-care in relation to their earnings. Despite this company’s deliberate positioning in the secondary labour market and despite the availability of a “just-in-time” agency work force, management was not particularly sympathetic to women’s inevitable family responsibilities or flexible in their attitudes. Louise explained that workers were not readily accessible by telephone when on the floor: messages would be taken but not delivered until break time. As a counter she instructed her children to always say it was an emergency when they called. When asked whether women’s needs for occasional time off were readily accommodated, Beth replied, “To a certain point, yes. I would say, yes.” But Louise reported that many had “a hard time getting time off for child care...

Basically to her [the human resources manager], your job was number one and everything was thereafter...It's not too bad any more, but before the union, yeah, it was hard."

This was a pointed dilemma for the women with children who uniformly asserted the importance of being a "good mom." Typical was Nicole's recollection, "Well, they'd get kind of ticked but my kids come first. Too bad." For this reason, Beth thought a union would enhance women's job security because "the company's going to have to have a reason to get you out of there. Not because your child is sick or stuff like that." But the problem was also described as a problem of favouritism. In Beth's experience, "It would really depend on who you got on the phone" when calling to say you wouldn't be coming to work. "Certain supervisors, you would lie. You wouldn't tell them the truth"—a strategy affirmed by Louise who said, "No, you said you were sick, because you knew that, then, that would be the end of it."

A related concern was the shift work pattern prior to unionization, which required one-third of the employees to work afternoon shift from Tuesday through Thursday, modified afternoon shift on Friday, and day shift Saturday. No one I interviewed complained about shift work *per se*; it was the unfairness of its distribution that upset people. In Beth's words, "They used to have one shift that was stuck on afternoons all the time. That wasn't fair. It wasn't fair at all for these people, because that was a condition that they got hired that they had to stay on an afternoon shift plus they had to double back on the Saturday shift." The double-back on Friday-Saturday was physically very difficult, Susie said, but management "just didn't care. They had no compassion, no nothing." Personal circumstances were never taken into account. Teresa complained, "A lot of us want to switch with others, but they won't let you...If one likes steady afternoons because their husband's home at night and she doesn't have to pay a babysitter or whatever, you know, but they won't even budge."

Asked if he thought steady afternoon shift was a women's issue, the union staff representative said it was a human rights issue because it is just as hard for men not to see their children as for women. But the evidence suggests that the women bore disproportionately the weight of the shift work. Invariably, they were up early with their children after working until 1 a.m., did housework, and often prepared the family dinner (which they would not be home to eat) before leaving for afternoon shift. Asked if she found life stressful, Louise said, "Sometimes I find it a little bit hectic when I'm on afternoons trying to get up for seven o'clock in the morning after I worked all night and get the kids up and ready for school, take them to school, come home, and then I like to do all my housecleaning that I have to do right away, and then by that time it's time to pick them

up and bring them home for lunch, take them back. Like, the day is quite busy, but I guess basically I'm just used to it. It's really no big deal any more."

The most elusive women's issue in this workplace was gender harassment. (I heard no reports of sexual harassment.) Although managerial abuse of workers was endemic, no one argued that its incidence or form was gender-related. Yet, I find this conclusion difficult to resist. Managers of both genders seemed to delight in humiliating workers in ways that targeted them as women: in one case, by monitoring Susie's washroom use (following her in and checking under the toilet door); more commonly, by reducing women to tears. Both Patricia and Susie described this style of management as "pushing people's buttons"—"to see which ones they can walk over and which ones they can't," Susie thought.

More than one woman described a situation in which she was instructed by a supervisor to perform the job one way, only to be told by another, "I don't care who told you, you listen to what I have to say." "I started crying, like, because who am I supposed to listen to?," Vicky asked. "I've seen people humiliated in front of other people. [Reduced to tears] lots of times," said Nicole, who suspected that women were often dismissed and belittled because they were women. "I notice when you have a man supervisor talking to a man employee they treat them differently than a man that's talking to a woman...A man—when a man talks to a man is when, 'Hey, buddy,' you know, and that. When a man's talking to a woman, it's like they're thinking, 'Oh, dummy, what does she know?'"

DEFINING THE ISSUES

At one level, there is nothing in these women's accounts of their reasons for supporting the organizing drive that contradicts conventional industrial relations theory. One could apply the standard voice-exit, union as countervailing power model to the data reported here without apparent distortion. These workers sought union representation to give voice to their job-related concerns and to constrain managerial power that had run amuck. But the devil is in the detail. Collective bargaining is about specifics, particularly in North America where legal rights are few, with the result that collective agreements are typically long, intricate documents interpreted with a legalistic eye to detail.

From the workers' point of view, collective bargaining may be broadly described as the search for fairness and equity on the job. However, the particular interpretation and application of these principles can differ significantly from workplace to workplace, so that it is important to ask what workers think the union voice is for; what principles of fairness and equity

they wish to enact. At this level, the answer is gendered. Women workers routinely face different terms and conditions of employment from men. In some respects, this has been addressed by women's efforts to put issues such as sexual harassment, maternity leave, and pay equity on unions' bargaining agendas (with mixed success⁷), but in other respects women's demand for gender equality is a thorough-going critique of the standard collective bargaining model. The embeddeness of these male-designed practices and the challenge posed by women in the workplace have been well-described by Kainer (1998) and Creese (1996).

What these women saw was "bad management"—in fact, almost a textbook version of managerial practices that often lead to unionization. What they did not see were the structural roots of these practices. In my opinion, gender discrimination was a fact of life in this workplace but invisible precisely because it was systemic in nature. To move beyond the "bad management" understanding of their situation would have required the women to connect their terms and conditions of employment to the gendered division of labour in the automobile industry as a whole. But this was far from obvious. In this industry (as in goods production, generally), it is the employment of women in "good jobs"—on the line at the Big Three, for example—that is the exception and consequently seen and remarked upon. By contrast, the over-representation of women in poorly paid, labour-intensive jobs in parts production and distribution is so normal as to be invisible.

Yet, to label these "bad jobs" would not respect these women's work experiences. Most liked their jobs: they liked working with other women, they liked not taking the job home with them, and if they were not convinced that management respected their need for time off the job, they knew how to subvert the system. For most of the women I interviewed, these were definitely the best jobs they had ever had. All but one had spent their entire working lives in the secondary labour market, typically, in jobs that offered lower pay, no benefits, fewer and less predictable hours, and even less accommodation of their family responsibilities than their current employer.

Gender discrimination in this workplace was obscured by its everyday form. Like most Canadians, these women understood discrimination as the intentional act of one person against another so had difficulty perceiving discrimination when it was embedded in longstanding organizational

7. Boudreault and Plante (2001: 35) reported that most major collective agreements in Canada reflected prevailing employment standards legislation. Although one in six women was entitled to 20 weeks of maternity leave at 93 per cent of their normal salary, almost half received no "top-up" to their employment insurance benefit.

structures and procedures. Naming their experiences “gender discrimination” was even more problematic because the initiators were sometimes women. Intuitively, the women I interviewed understood gender discrimination as something men do to women, which made it impossible for them to conceptualize the harassing behaviour of women supervisors as gender-based. The more abstract concept of patriarchy as a system in which we are all caught was not available to them (Johnson 2001). Consequently, they relied on the generic and presumptively genderless idea of “bad management” to describe their circumstances.

“Bad management” as the reason for organizing a union was reinforced by the people—chiefly, fathers, spouses, and brothers—to whom most of the women in this study turned for information and advice. More importantly, it was the interpretation of their circumstances proffered by the three union organizers and staff representative assigned to assist these workers. In their view, organizing drives are fuelled by “worker” issues—job security, fairness, dignity and respect—regardless of the gender composition of the work force. Asked whether they had a particular strategy for organizing workplaces in which women workers predominate, Karen replied, “I don’t believe so. I think we do them all pretty much the same.” The issues highlighted in leaflets distributed at the plant gate were generic, Bob said: “There’s quite a bit of it that can be used from workplace to workplace.” In his experience, “Workers don’t want a lot. They want to go to work; they want to be left alone; they want to be treated fairly. They want to, all, have an equal share of things.”

Women’s issues, by contrast, were constructed as less significant because of their presumed limited appeal. Asked whether women’s issues were present in organizing drives on which they had worked, Karen could not think of any. John identified, “the whole issue of equality” but had no way of describing what that meant in practice. Steve referred to paid maternity leave and child care; however, he specifically ruled out shift work which, he said, was a human rights issue, rather than a women’s issue, because not seeing your children is hard on men as well as women. To Bob, women’s issues were “usually pretty trivial things about housekeeping and stuff.” Did he mean “two jobs?,” Karen asked. “No,” he said, “housekeeping, I’m talking in the workplace and supplies that women would need.” We “deal with that individual thing,” Bob explained, “but in many cases it’s not something we put into the literature or, you know, or are talking about.”

The view that women’s issues reflect the needs of particular women in particular circumstances precluded any vision of their systemic nature. Cut free of their structural roots, the problems these women routinely encountered at work were visible only as specific examples of generic

problems experienced by all workers regardless of their gender. What, from a feminist perspective, was evidence of discrimination against women was seen by the organizers as the chafe of labour-management relations in any non-union workplace. So, for example, there was no recognition that women did not have the same opportunities for advancement as men.

The organizers were startled to hear what I had learned from my analysis of the job assignments listed in the collective agreement but were uncertain about its relevance. The problem, as they saw it, was not gender discrimination rooted in job segregation by gender but blocked promotion resulting from managerial favouritism, easily remedied by the standard seniority clause. Likewise, the organizers did not consider that women's need for time off the job for family responsibilities was anything other than a special case of the general "worker" need described by Bob as having "a schedule that fits your needs versus the employer's needs." Nor were they prepared to consider the harassment experienced in this workplace as an example of what Edwards (1979: 179) calls "simple management" that women and racial minorities routinely encounter because they are more likely to be employed by small firms in the secondary labour market or that harassment could be gender-specific. In response to my probing of this issue, Bob objected. "That's not what we're talking about," he complained. "We're talking about supervisors just being on people to get numbers out and let things go that you know are good—are not good products. But you know this stuff happens everywhere."

The lack of understanding of gender relations in the workplace left the organizers overly confident that union representation would lead to "justice and equality for all," as promised in a leaflet distributed at the plant on May 16. They advertised traditional union policies and practices—e.g., clearly defined rules and procedures, seniority rights, and job evaluation—as solutions to favouritism and unfairness, but were unaware of the ways these commonly used bargaining strategies tend to reinforce discriminatory managerial practices such as job segregation by gender and low pay for "women's work." Thus, the promise of "fair rates for various job classes" touted in a leaflet distributed on May 28 did not apply to the packager position. Because the benchmark in this union/industry was "men's work," the considerable skill, effort, and responsibility entailed in the packager job, and its centrality to the firm's business, were largely invisible. The staff representative responsible for negotiations described the job as "simple...not a complex job as far as the auto industry goes," an interpretation that suggests that union representation will do little to challenge the particularly low pay of the majority of the women in this workplace. Pay equity was not an issue in the campaign nor was it mentioned in the first collective agreement.

These attitudes parallel those articulated by union leaders and organizers of major American unions interviewed by Crain (1994: 245), who concluded that “the existing organizing model for manufacturing unions continues to be one designed to capture the white male manufacturing worker who is primary breadwinner.” A majority of participants did not see gender as a significant factor affecting organizing campaigns. Most said their unions did not organize around women’s issues such as comparable worth, sexual harassment, and maternity leave, which some labelled “nonessential” or “luxury” items. In their view, organizing campaigns remained focussed around “basic,” “bread-and-butter” issues: wages, benefits, and working conditions. The exception was a group of organizers, mostly women, who identified family issues and sexual harassment as important elements of campaigns but easily overlooked because they are often intertwined with or lurking beneath other issues, such as wages (p. 243).⁸

Industrial relations theory is similarly blind to the structural realities of women’s paid work and their implications for labour-management relations. Because existing theories of union growth and attachment articulate a belief-system to which many academics and practitioners are firmly committed, new dimensions to old problems are hidden from view. Women’s issues extend well beyond the obvious list that includes maternity leave, flexible hours, protection from sexual harassment, or even pay equity. Feminists argue that women’s issues permeate all aspects of workplace/union relations because gender is a central dynamic in people’s lives. For this reason, Briskin (1999: 83) calls for a thorough-going “gendering” of work-related issues, which means moving away from the idea of a clearly articulated “women’s platform of concerns to a recognition of the gender implications in all issues.”⁹

CONCLUSION: THESE WORKERS ARE WOMEN, TOO

The women workers interviewed for this study exhibited a double-minded consciousness, both worker and woman. Clearly, they identified as workers committed to their jobs despite the shortcomings of their em-

8. Crain’s findings contradict those reported by Lynn and Brister (1989) who said that organizers in their study, most of whom were men, were significantly less likely to stress job security, participation in decision-making and grievance procedures in workplaces with a high proportion of women and more likely to discuss technical training and satisfying work. Note, however, that Crain (1994: 244) raised the possibility that male organizers might be working from stereotypical assumptions about the needs of women if they continue to conceptualize men as family breadwinners.

9. My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this reference.

ployer. When asked why they supported the union organizing drive they explained their involvement using generally accepted industrial relations concepts: managerial favouritism, lack of job security, and abusive treatment by supervisors. These are the concerns identified over and over again in the literature and which the union representatives responsible for this organizing drive said are at the root of every campaign. But this explanation is insufficient. These workers also identified as women and their decisions to join the union were influenced by their experiences as women workers: job segregation by gender and blocked promotional opportunities, management's lack of accommodation for their family responsibilities, the low value attached to the packager job performed by the majority of women, and gendered forms of harassment, even if not fully articulated by each interviewee.

Why the women gravitated towards the more conventional statement of their problems—favouritism rather than gender inequity, for example—is a complex issue that needs further investigation. To object that it was not the women themselves but the outsider-researcher who labelled their terms and conditions of employment discriminatory cannot be seriously regarded. The fact that these women workers' subordination as women was not wholly visible to them does not make it any less real. If workers' discontents were always obvious to them there would be no need for an organizing campaign: it would have already happened. It is because work-related dissatisfactions are commonly latent, hidden by the everyday necessity of working for a living, that they need to be dug out, named, and collectivized. Organizing is a potentially powerful process precisely because it encourages workers to label their discontents "grievances" and see them as subject to change. Seemingly satisfied workers are suddenly "stirred up" by outsiders, or so employers claim. The simple act of bringing workers together to discuss their terms and conditions of employment revealed problems that had previously gone unnoticed by them, participants in Freeman and Rogers's (1999: 23) study reported.

The apparent preference for the standard industrial relations explanation of their situation could also be said to reflect these workers' true interests. There is a tendency in industrial relations to label the former concerns "universal" and those that affect women in particular "secondary" or "special interest," leaving the impression that the conventionally identified problems are the real issues motivating workers to join unions. But there is nothing objective about this categorization: it flows from the ways we have thought about and practised industrial relations over time. We are attuned to hear what we expect to hear, so that when reasons are intertwined, as they were in this case, it is the established way of thinking that shapes understanding while information that might challenge this

perspective slips by unheard or is dismissed as unimportant. In fact, there was no clear division between general and specific problems in these women's stories. The separation I have offered here for analytical purposes actually distorts the unified way in which they were described during the interviews. So, for example, favouritism was often cited as the general problem, of which women's unfairly restricted access to better-paying jobs was a particular example; however, it was also the case that discriminatory practices were named as the problem, with favouritism in the form of the under-representation of women in the materials handler classification named as an example. In any event, both expressions of the problem led to unionization as the solution.

Conventional industrial relations thinking implicitly sets gender consciousness apart from, and positions it in competition with, worker/union consciousness. But feminist theory does not. Feminist analysis takes gender as its starting point but insists that women be understood as complete and complex individuals whose life circumstances and understanding of those circumstances are shaped in relation to their gender, social class, race/ethnicity, and sexual preference. Within the feminist paradigm there is no reason to assume that rising gender consciousness will lead women workers away from the union project: the outcome is a question of practice, not theory.

Consciousness raising along either dimension—gender or worker/union—is a transformative process. Individuals are encouraged to look beneath the surface realities of everyday life to identify the structural and ideological origins of their social, economic, and political oppression as women and/or as workers. From either perspective, the process is collective in nature with social change as its purpose. Both use the metaphor of “voice” to denote the empowerment that results.

MacKinnon's (1989: 83) discussion of feminist consciousness raising, which she defined as “the collective critical reconstitution of the meaning of women's social experience, as women live through it,” captures these commonalities. “The process is transformative as well as perceptive,” she argued, “since thought and thing are inextricable and reciprocally constitutive of women's oppression” (p. 84). Like union organizing, feminist organizing requires a collective vision: “What brings people to be conscious of their oppression as common rather than remaining on the level of bad feelings, to see their group identity as a systematic necessity that benefits another group, is the first question of organizing” (p. 86). Like workers' oppression, women's oppression is grounded in everyday social relations, which become visible as sources of oppression through discussion: “The technique explores the social world each woman inhabits through her speaking of it, through comparison with each other woman's

experiences, and through women's experiences of each other in the group itself" (p. 86). Consciousness raising on this model "becomes a form of political practice" (p. 83), the means by which discontents are transformed into grievances (p. 86), the process by which women move from silence to voice (p. 86).

Whether rising gender consciousness brings women workers to the union movement or leads them away, as many academics and unionists fear, depends on the extent to which unions are willing to accommodate women's demands for participation and empowerment. Feminist authors such as Briskin (1999) and Warskett (1996) are hopeful; in their view, reform is underway. They observe that, under pressure from women activists, many unions have undertaken structural changes and introduced bargaining policies and practices that take account of women members' needs as women. That these same initiatives have heightened democracy within the union movement is evidence, to them, that in reaching out to women workers the union movement sows the seeds of its renewal.

Unless practitioners and theorists deliberately explore the workplace through a gendered lens, women's workplace and union experiences will remain under-theorized and poorly reflected in practice. Absent a frame of reference that draws attention to and encourages the analysis of job segregation by gender, women's assumed responsibility for home and family, the low value attached to traditional women's skills and abilities, and the routine trivialization of women as people, the relevance of these phenomena to the study of industrial relations will never be understood. Precisely because these are everyday realities, integral to the way employers do business, these systemic forms of gender discrimination are invisible to the untutored eye. More likely to be noticed, and studied, is the "good" treatment of women, that is, women in "non-traditional" jobs with terms and conditions of employment on a par with men's.

Traditional models of union growth and attachment that purport to be universal are, in fact, male models, well-suited to men but deficient when applied to women workers.¹⁰ When union organizers anchor their claims about the benefits of union representation exclusively in commonly accepted ideas about fairness and equity, or academics build their research projects around these concepts alone, they unwittingly reference outdated theories. Practitioners and theorists, together, must critique the standard collective bargaining model from the point of view of women workers and actively advocate changes that would improve women's terms and conditions of employment.

10. For a discussion of the centrality of the male model in traditional trade union practice, see Forrest (1997).

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RÉSUMÉ

Comment intéresser les femmes au syndicalisme ?

Cette étude explore le rôle que jouent les enjeux spécifiques aux femmes dans la décision de joindre un syndicat. L'étude a été effectuée au cours d'une campagne de syndicalisation dans un lieu de travail où la majorité de l'effectif était féminin.

L'analyse s'en tient principalement à l'identification des enjeux chez les femmes, enjeux qui n'étaient pas évidents au départ, ni pour les travailleurs ni pour les représentants syndicaux. Les données ont été recueillies à l'aide d'entrevues semi-structurées auprès de dix femmes, un an après la signature de la première convention collective et deux ans après le début de la campagne de syndicalisation. On a demandé aux participantes de décrire leur histoire de travail (rémunéré), ce qu'elles ont aimé et ce qu'elles n'ont pas aimé dans leur travail passé et actuel, la répartition des tâches domestiques dans leur famille et, enfin, ce qu'elles pensaient de la campagne de syndicalisation. Trois organisateurs syndicaux et le représentant syndical responsable de la négociation et de l'administration de la convention collective furent également interviewés.

La question d'ordre théorique soulevée par l'étude est la suivante : dans quelle mesure la relation des travailleuses avec le syndicat est semblable ou différente à celle des travailleurs masculins ? Le discours dominant actuel en relations du travail met plutôt l'emphase sur les similitudes entre les femmes et les hommes, sans tenir compte des différences bien documentées entre le travail rémunéré et non rémunéré des femmes et les expériences syndicales. Dans une perspective féministe, la conclusion à l'effet que le sexe n'est pas important au moment des campagnes de syndicalisation demeure une analyse inadéquate de ce qui constitue les enjeux de la syndicalisation sur les lieux de travail des femmes.

À un certain niveau, on ne trouve rien dans les comptes rendus des femmes sur les raisons d'appuyer la syndicalisation venant à l'encontre de la théorie traditionnelle en relations industrielles. En effet, on peut, sans déformer la vérité, analyser les données en se servant du modèle du syndicalisme comme étant un contre-pouvoir, comme l'expression standard d'une voix. La plupart des participantes niaient la présence d'une discrimination fondée sur le sexe sur les lieux de travail et se sentaient mal à l'aise avec l'expression « d'enjeux féminins » de négociation collective. Lorsqu'on leur demandait de décrire ce qu'elles pensaient de leur employeur, toutes ont mentionné des problèmes de favoritisme, de gestion abusive, de sécurité d'emploi aléatoire et, à un degré moindre, de bas salaires; ce sont, comme on le sait, des points communs cités dans les écrits sur le sujet.

Cependant, on peut procéder à une lecture alternative de la situation. La discrimination fondée sur le sexe était bien réelle dans ce lieu de travail où la division de l'emploi sur la base du sexe servait de fondement à l'organisation du travail. D'ailleurs, un certain nombre de femmes ont souligné différents aspects de cette réalité. Des enjeux ancrés dans leurs expériences particulières comme travailleuses venaient s'entremêler avec des plaintes à l'endroit d'un traitement inéquitable. Également associées aux raisons de se joindre à un syndicat, se trouvaient des plaintes à l'endroit d'un accès bloqué aux postes mieux rémunérés, d'une rémunération trop faible lorsqu'il s'agissait d'un travail pour les femmes, des problèmes de double journée de travail et des expériences de formes de harcèlement basées sur le sexe. Les participantes n'utilisaient pas les termes d'enjeux féminins, mais parlaient plutôt d'inéquité en général de la part de leur employeur et non à l'endroit des femmes en particulier.

Cette lecture de la situation a été confirmée par les organisateurs syndicaux et le représentant syndical, qui ont soutenu également que le sexe n'était pas pertinent dans cette campagne de syndicalisation, pas plus que dans aucune autre campagne. Selon leur point de vue, les femmes comme les hommes joignent un syndicat pour des raisons qui sont avant tout propres à tous les travailleurs, par exemple, la sécurité d'emploi, l'équité

et la dignité, et qui ne sont pas spécifiques au sexe. Dans cette perspective, les questions féminines sont considérées comme peu ou pas significatives à cause de leur attrait perçu comme limité. Ce qui d'un point de vue féministe se présentait comme une évidence de discrimination à l'endroit des femmes apparaissait chez les organisateurs syndicaux comme étant le lot quotidien des relations du travail dans tous les lieux de travail.

Ces femmes ont bien perçu ce qu'était une « mauvaise gestion » sans pour autant identifier les racines structurelles de ces pratiques. La discrimination sexuelle au travail passait inaperçue justement à cause de sa nature systémique. Dépasser cette interprétation de « mauvaise gestion » aurait exigé de la part des femmes qu'elles relient leurs conditions de travail à la division sexuée du travail dans une industrie où la surreprésentation des femmes dans des emplois faiblement rémunérés et à forte densité de main-d'œuvre est tellement habituelle que cette situation perd toute sa visibilité auprès des travailleurs et des représentants syndicaux.

Les femmes qui ont contribué à cette étude ont fait montre d'un double niveau de conscience, à la fois comme travailleuse et comme femme. Cependant, on accorde une crédibilité à un seul niveau dans l'analyse courante en relations industrielles en donnant préséance aux préoccupations des travailleurs en général et moins aux enjeux qui seraient spécifiques aux femmes. Cette manière d'effectuer des catégories n'a rien d'objectif : elle découle de celle dont les relations du travail sont enseignées et pratiquées avec le temps. Par conséquent, quand les raisons s'entremêlent, tel qu'on l'a vu dans ce cas, c'est la façon bien établie de penser qui façonne la compréhension de la situation, alors que l'information qui pourrait remettre en question cette perspective se perd ou bien est délaissée, n'étant pas considérée comme importante.

Là où la théorie traditionnelle des relations industrielles fait de la conscience du sexe une chose à part et la place en compétition avec les concepts de conscience syndicale-ouvrière, la thèse féministe ne le fait pas. À l'intérieur du paradigme féministe, il n'y a aucune raison de penser que la conscience du sexe peut détourner les femmes d'un projet syndical : le résultat devient une question de pratique et non de théorie. À savoir si le fait de soulever cette conscience féminine va attirer les femmes dans le mouvement syndical ou si elle va les en éloigner, tout dépend de la mesure dans laquelle les syndicats sont prêts à répondre aux demandes de participation et d'implication formulées par les femmes.