

Demanding equality for women workers: Remembering Organized Working Women ^[1]

Author: Peters, K.

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Excerpts

In the 1970s, women continued to enter the labour force in rising numbers and many of these women became union members for the first time. While more women were now members of trade unions, they were underrepresented in leadership positions and women's issues continued to be marginalized in the Canadian labour movement.

In this context, delegates at the 1975 women's conference "Women in the Workforce, It's About Time," co-sponsored by the Labour Council of Metropolitan Toronto and Humber College Women's Centre, passed a resolution to establish the organization Organized Working Women (OWW).

The OWW would bring together any woman who was a member of a bona fide collective bargaining unit to "convince the organized labour movement to take up the cause of working women."

In pursuit of improving women's position in the labour movement and in society, the OWW supported women to take up leadership positions in their unions, brought the demands of the feminist movement into the labour movement by establishing women's committees, and used the resources of unions to advance gender equity at the bargaining table.

In what feels like a nadir of feminist organizing in Canada, we should remember the OWW as a testament to what effective, autonomous organizing can accomplish for women workers, while also learning from history to avoid repeating the OWW's mistake of unintentionally excluding marginalized women.

Sexism in the labour movement

The establishment of the OWW occurred as Canada transitioned to a neoliberal political regime characterized by cutbacks to childcare, education, and healthcare, and wage and price controls that would cap real wages in the mid-1970s.

Even as this situation increasingly necessitated a dual-income household and women's participation in the labour force, society and the labour movement resisted this shift, and there continued to be a debate about whether married women should even be in the workforce.

Within trade unions, the perception was that women might even weaken the labour movement and that they wouldn't be strong enough in fights with the boss.

Former OWW member, Barbara Cameron, reflects on the patriarchal culture of the labour movement in the 1970s, "I remember the climate of the labour movement. It was overwhelmingly male. When we hear about what goes on in the military today and the problems of sexual harassment . . . it's not all that different than what the climate was like in the labour movement."

Even speaking at a union conference could be a hostile experience for women who would be shouted down and heckled.

"I remember being in my first OFL convention. David Archer was the president at the time, and he was chairing, and a woman got up and she wanted a point of privilege, and he just told her to 'sit down, sister' and 'sit down and shut up, you're out of order'. And I was thinking, am I going to feel comfortable going up to a mic in such a hostile environment," explains OWW member Holly Kirkconnell.

As ongoing sexist hostility of this sort continued to make unions "Old Boys Clubs," the OWW provided much-needed autonomous organizing opportunities for women trade unionists. Through the OWW, women could meet and strategize outside of traditional union spaces, while gaining the skills and education needed to effectively pressure their unions to take up women's issues.

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