

Another Side of the Tracks

Sex Harassment at CN

BY SHELLY LOGAN

CN is like a boys' club. The same day that I complained about sexual harassment, I was harassed for complaining, although only myself, the harasser and management were supposed to know of the complaint. I was laughed at, received rude phone calls and men were constantly reminded, in a joking manner, not to say or do anything near me. I was told I wouldn't have been any fun a few years earlier when they spent their lunches in strip clubs. When a supervisor was given a written copy of my complaint, he said, "I don't need this shit."

I worked for the Canadian National Railway Company for 14 months. I began in September, 1988 as a Signal and Communications Helper. I ended up at the Canadian Human Rights Commission, filing charges against the company for discriminating against me because of my sex, by treating me differently and by failing to provide a work environment free of sexual harassment.

Let me tell you what it was like where I worked.

My job was to help install and maintain lights along the railway tracks and at crossings. Also to wire up bungalows, and basically help do whatever electronic work necessary. I was one of the few women in a predominantly male environment. Shortly after I began working an apprentice told me, after I objected to his use of the word "fuck," that I should "go home" or "get used to it," since I was

working in a "man's job." He told me that I would have to go to the washroom outside like the men do, because no one would drive me to find a washroom. He also said I wasn't capable of doing the job because of my size and because I was a woman. I complained about the apprenticeship to management, but nothing was done.

One morning during coffee break, another apprentice made rude comments about the *Toronto Sun's* "Sunshine Girl" posters in a nearby CN building. He also graphically described an x-rated movie. I complained to a co-worker, who told the foreman. He talked to the apprentice, but told me that the apprentice wouldn't listen. Again, nothing was done.

Later, I was asked if I wanted to work as a Maintainer's Helper at the Signal and Communications Helper rate of pay. A male co-worker was also asked if he wanted to work as a Maintainer's Helper, but at the higher Apprentice rate of pay.

A foreman made comments like, "Women are taking men's jobs," and "Women should get married." A female summer Signal and Communications Helper soon transferred away, because she could not deal with his attitude.

In Welland, Ontario, I was not allowed to do a "pole top." This job includes climbing to the top of a pole to work on the wires. I was fully trained for this task, but a male co-worker said he didn't want me to get hurt. Even though I

Policies and Practice

In the past few years, sexual harassment has been recognized as an important issue, both by labour and management. Management's concern is the usual one — loss of profits, absenteeism, low productivity and more grievances. And, in the U.S. at least, the threat of major lawsuits.

From labour's point of view, sexual harassment splits the membership — isolating women and weakening the union. The Canadian Auto Workers passed a policy on harassment in the workplace in 1988. The Steelworkers set a strong policy in place in 1989. In the fall of 1990, Local 1 of the Canadian Union of Public Employees — representing over 1,000 Toronto Hydro workers — drafted a policy that deals with harassment as a health and safety issue. The policy would allow a worker to walk off the job with pay if she or he is being harassed.

Some studies have shown that about 75 per cent of women who work in traditionally male occupations experience sexual harassment, but the problem is not limited to those jobs. For example, a U.S. survey reports that 76 per cent of nurses experience harassment at work, usually by doctors or patients. In every area of work, the majority of complaints are made against supervisors or upper management.

Having a policy on paper is a good start but it's not enough. Shelly Logan's workplace had a policy, but that didn't help her. Many unions are beginning to take an active role in combatting sexual harassment, by management and by co-workers, and that's good news.

Sexual harassment has nothing to do with sex. It's the abuse of power.

— *Our Times Staff*

complained to the foreman, I was still not allowed to do it.

After working more than eight months, I was given one day's notice to do the Basic Electrical Test. Employees are usually given one to two weeks of notice. The test is important because it helps determine layoff status and promotion opportunities. It was only after I complained that I was given more time to prepare. Also, I was told that I would be able to rewrite the test only once if I failed it, but the same supervisor allowed a male co-worker to rewrite the test four times.

In September 1989, I gave my foreman a letter about the way I was being discriminated against. I gave the letter to him so he could pass it on to the supervisor of the Great Lakes Region. I was told that I had to go through the chain of command with my letter. I was then called into another supervisor's office. There was a three-foot-long poster of a woman in a bikini behind his desk.

Porn as Usual

That same day I spoke with yet another

supervisor, who made comments like "Don't you see this behaviour outside the company?" and "Why complain about the 'Sunshine Girls' on the walls — the newspaper is legal." This supervisor focused on the conduct of two apprentices. When I explained that the problems were happening every day and being caused by almost everyone, he implied that it was up to me to document and prove my allegations.

Soon after, I was told by a supervisor that the pornographic pictures and the "Sunshine Girl" posters would be taken down. Also, the supervisor agreed to circulate CN's sexual harassment policy, and a letter advising employees and management of the repercussions if the policy was not followed. I don't think this ever happened.

Later that year, in Windsor, a male CN police officer asked me if male co-workers stay in the same hotel room with me when I'm working. He also joked that he once saved a woman from rape — he stopped chasing her.

Although not all of the comments against

women were directed at me personally, male co-workers felt free to make them in my presence. I had to work in areas full of sexually explicit photographs of women, and graffiti like "Women trainmasters are women too ugly to become waitresses."

I found the situation at CN impossible to combat. Not only did management permit discrimination to occur, they also actively discriminated against me themselves. I was angered, humiliated, frustrated, embarrassed, frightened and disgusted. The poisoned work environment not only affected my work, but also my personal life. In late 1989 the stress forced me to go on sick leave.

Brotherhood Blues

You may want to know where the union was while all this was happening. My main problem with the union was that they were made up of the "brotherhood." I found the attitude of the union the same as the employer's. Maybe I would have seen the union differently if I had years of experience in union circles, like many of



Women and Work: A Pipe Fitter at CN

Photograph by Jaren McLead, courtesy the Canadian Women's Movement Archives / Archives canadiennes du mouvement des femmes

the men I worked with. But, as a new member, what was I to think when two executive members of the union had conversations speculating about who I may have had sexual relations with. One of them actually said (about a co-worker I don't want to name) "We know why he's working with Shelly. He's screwing her."

Their high-school locker room idea of "getting the girl" was intimidating. I knew I'd have absolutely no support if I lodged a complaint with the union. Besides, my complaint also concerned the people I'd have to complain to. The two union offi-

cial I mentioned were both foremen.

I felt I had to remove myself entirely from the situation, because the stress became so overwhelming. I was angry and frightened all the time. I was afraid that if I complained to the union everyone would hate me, wives would get hurt and I'd be responsible for people losing their jobs. Also, I lived with these people in various motels within the region in south-western Ontario. I was afraid of what the organization could do to me while I was away from home and basically in control of the work gang.

My anger and fear grew from the outright hostility directed at me — from management, employees and union executives.

I found that most CN employees in my department had a prejudiced, preconceived attitude about women, blacks, religious groups, etc., and they ganged together to keep these opinions alive. They made sure their opinions were known, especially to the women. I felt the union had no positive role in my case. The whole concept of the "brotherhood" contributed to the problem.

Although the people at the Human Rights Commission are helpful and sympathetic, they admit that they are so overloaded with cases that it can take ages to begin an investigation. And, if a decision is made in the complainant's favour, little can actually be done to compensate her.

Although the situation often seems

hopeless, it will never improve if women don't first become aware, and then make themselves heard. Don't be shamed into being "one of the boys." Don't be afraid you're being a "bitch," or can't take a joke. You're not uptight because you believe ignorance, sexual advances, sexist remarks or pornography have no place in the workplace.

It is unfortunate that a victim has so little recourse, but to ignore the situation only condones it.

Sexual harassment can be rude jokes, sexist remarks, unwelcome touching or advances, or virtually anything that makes your work environment hostile or uncomfortable. My experience shows that the "old boys' network" is still prevalent in the workforce. There is still gross ignorance and misunderstanding, not only of what sexual harassment is, but also how it can traumatise the victim. In fact, I found the blasé attitude towards the problem by friends and relatives as stressful as the harassment itself.

I hope my story will provide much needed comprehension of the prevalence and seriousness of this abuse.

Shelly Logan is now studying physical education at the University of Western Ontario.

This article appeared in Our Times, Vol. 9, No. 6 (Nov. 1990). A similar version also appeared in Matrix, the London Status of Women Action Groups newsletter (June/July/August 1990).

This is what I kept asking myself

- How will I live?
- Am I too sensitive?
- Am I uptight?
- Can't I get along?
- Will anyone believe me?

This is what I was being told at work

- "You're taking a man's job."
- "Get married."
- "Don't do that. You might get hurt."
- "You'll have to urinate outdoors like the men do."
- "You're too small to do this job."
- "You don't like porn pictures because you're jealous."
- "You can't take a joke."

This is what I was hearing at home, from family and friends

- "You had a great job. Why didn't you just ignore it?"
- "I didn't do it!"
- "It's no use complaining. No one is going to change anyway."
- "Do you have another job yet?"
- "Be careful. They may sue you."
- "I'd be afraid to complain."
- "It just can't be that serious."

—S.L.

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