

Factory Women go to Class

Marilyn Spink



Les Femmes qui étudient à l'usine; une nouvelle expérience.

'We thought we'd be lucky to get twenty women for that first class at the Carhartt factory. At four o'clock people started leaving their sewing machines and going to the cafeteria. Forty-three women showed up to learn English that day. Even more came to the next class.'

Andre Bekerman, International Representative for the United Garment Workers Union of America, thinks that his union's experiment with English as a Second Language (ESL) classes at the factory is a big success. The United Garment Workers are the second union in Toronto to give the classes a try.

Last summer shop stewards for the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers' Union distributed a leaflet in four languages to workers in the Tip Top Tailor building. The union wanted to see if there would be a demand for English classes. April Coulton, Education Director for Amalgamated, says that six workers said they'd come to classes at the Union Hall in the evening. Sixty signed up for classes right after work in the plant cafeteria. The second week ninety women came to the cafeteria to learn English.

The Toronto Board of Education pays the teachers, who must meet the Board's standards and get the unions' approval, on the basis of one teacher's maintaining a minimum of fifteen students in each class.

The garment industry in Toronto is sustained by the labour of thousands of immigrant workers, most of them women. Many speak no English. Some cannot read or write in their own language.

Conventional ESL classes are offered to immigrants during the day, or in the evening, after dinner. Working immigrant women with family responsibilities find it extremely difficult to get out in the evening to attend English classes. For many it is impossible.

Although some of the women attending classes after work at their factories are recent immigrants, many have been in Canada for more than five years. A workplace program is the only opportunity they have to learn.

Mary Ellen Nettle, the teacher who co-ordinated the

initial program at Tip Top, says that the pilot projects this year have shown two big problems with ESL in the workplace. The first is that the usual ESL workbooks are just not relevant to factory workers. They feature men with briefcases and women at the sink.

The teachers, three men and three women, have been producing their own teaching materials for the classes. They are part of the ESL Literacy Core Group, a project of local community centres. This special preparation takes longer than the teaching does, but the teachers get paid only for teaching.

Another big problem has been to ensure that, as the Board of Education requires, there are fifteen in each class. When production fell early this year, the factories at Tip Top often let women off work at one o'clock. Some women valued the English classes so much that they stayed until five when classes began, but class sizes dropped. Layoffs also caused a decrease in the number of students. Participation rates have been consistently higher at Carhartt's.

There's an easy explanation for this. Carhartt's management lets workers leave half an hour early for classes, and will pay them for half an hour of the hour-long class.

The teachers and union representatives have formed a Task Force to search out funding for a more ambitious program next term. The Task Force intends to convince management in other factories that they should contribute to the program. The group will contract with the Board of Education to teach three hundred students in factories next year. The contract will give unions some flexibility in the size of the classes at different plants.

The Task Force intends to develop and publish a workbook and to produce other teaching aids for use in factory English classes.

One of the students at Tip Top wrote a letter of support for the Task Force's funding proposal. She said, 'I make pockets. I do piece work. I start work at 8. I finish work at 5. I like English classes because I don't speak English. I can't understand the foreman. Or my children. I make \$167 in one week. I want the class at Tip Top.'

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