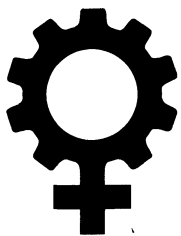


YUSA Strike Report—Ladies Last: the 6% Solution

Judith Posner



Ce qui suit est un rapport sur la grève des employé/e/s de soutien à l'Université York à Toronto. La majorité du syndicat (85%) sont des femmes.

York University's recent strike of support staff (YUSA) was quite clearly a women's issue. The facts speak for themselves. In contrast to faculty, professional and managerial personnel, the CUPE workers, who are largely male, YUSA is composed mainly of women—eighty-five per cent. Not surprisingly, this group is the lowest-paid on campus. Most YUSA members earn less than ten thousand a year, which is ten to twenty per cent or one to two thousand dollars below comparable public sector jobs. This average is also \$1,600 less than the salary of a groundsman who cuts the grass on campus, \$1,300 less than a caretaker, and \$400 less than the lowest-paid night cleaner. If YUSA members had accepted the four per cent offered them by management it would have meant an annual salary increase of between \$338 and \$392. Unfortunately the six per cent settlement does little to improve this figure, but it is a step in the right direction.

One argument that was used to justify the four per cent offer is the fact that other groups (YUFA and CUPE¹) have been offered a similar increase. But this is a distortion of the facts. Because CUPE and YUFA members have significantly higher incomes, their four per cent increase isn't comparable to YUSA's. Percentage increases discriminate against lower-wage workers, and at York this means women. In fact percentage increases not only help support the *status quo* but actually widen the gap between workers in the York community over

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time. In an academic community which espouses egalitarian democratic ideology in its classrooms this is an untenable situation.

Overall, the strike was a highly successful one that increased in momentum over time. This is why the administration was forced to reconsider its offer. Some faculty members supported the strike by rescheduling classes (legally they could not cancel) till after the strike was over. Atkinson College in particular closed down for about a week and a half. Other professors moved their classes off campus as a symbolic gesture. As far as the students are concerned there was a wide range of sympathies and non-sympathies with the strikers. One group of students maintained a sit-in in the administrative offices. Others supported the strike in principle although they continued to go to classes (if their professors were teaching) for fear of doing poorly in their courses. Others were downright hostile; going to such extremes as placing threatening phone calls to the YUSA headquarters saying they would run down picketers who got in their way. And unfortunately some picketers were seriously hurt and hospitalized by speeding cars. Numerous others were sideswiped or bumped by strikebreakers. It is believed that the most hostile group was young men in 'muscle' cars, but it is distressing to learn that many well-dressed young women also participated in the sport of hurling their cars at YUSA staff.

Why women would run down other women raises all sorts of interesting questions. Perhaps one explanation is guilt. The general feeling on the line was that most hostile students just wanted to get on with their courses and were thoroughly intolerant of anyone who would impede the earning of their BAs. The irony of course is that at the end of the road they may find that there are no jobs out there anyway, or that the only jobs that do exist are low-paying ones. Then maybe they will be on the picket line.

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Although much of the settlement salary increase has been lost through the strike itself, successful negotiations have been achieved on many non-salary matters. Job security has been improved and the issue of secretaries doing tasks of a personal nature for faculty (getting coffee and writing personal letters) has been resolved. But more important than any of the specifics of the settlement is the political mobilization of the YUSA women, who collectively raised their own consciousness as well as that of the York community. In fact, the day the strike ended a women's rally had been planned which would have mobilized support from various women's groups in Toronto.

From the inception of YUSA, management never really thought that a bunch of 'pin-money'² women would ever get their political act together, and many YUSA members themselves are surprised at their own political evolution. On the line one frequently heard women say 'I never liked unions or strikes, but I've changed.' As one older woman, previously not active politically, put it, 'It's hard not to be militant after nearly being run down.'

In short, the YUSA strike is a victory for women in that it proves we can be as political, as stubborn, and as well organized as anyone else in society, but the success should not go to our heads. In spite of all the positive gains, the truth of the matter is that as long as support staff are seen as a low priority item, women employees at York (and elsewhere) will have to continue to fight just to get the dregs of the budget during this era of frozen and slashed institutional funding.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 YUFA, York University Faculty Association. CUPE, Canadian Union of Public Employees.
- 2 There has been rumour about the number of sole-support mothers in YUSA. Unfortunately they don't have the statistics on this but it is believed to be significant. Furthermore, the question of pin money is a false and insulting issue. Equal pay for equal work means it's none of anybody's business what your financial status is, whether you're married, or whether your husband works.



DISCOVERY

A HANDBOOK ON WOMEN'S STUDIES IN SMALL COMMUNITIES

BACKGROUND

The Committee for Women's Studies was originated in Port Elgin, Ontario in November, 1977, and with the assistance of the Department of the Secretary of State (Women's Program), co-ordinated and presented a five session series in women's studies in March and April, 1978.

This series was unprecedented in the area, a largely rural community in southwestern Ontario. No similar studies were available to women through any existing agency; therefore the committee had no guidelines or format to follow, excepting those prepared for urban-centred programs.

The experience gained from organizing this pilot series, which drew an average attendance of 96 is exceptional. Plans are currently underway for a fall program with an expanded committee organizing a variety of women's studies activities.

We feel that a handbook prepared especially for groups considering or attempting similar projects in many Canadian communities without the resources of large urban centres will fill a need and possibly act as a catalyst in the development of learning facilities for women.

PROPOSAL

Our proposed handbook will provide a relevant resource for people or groups in small communities.

The format will allow for a detailed outline of our organizational methods, with an allowance for flexibility. Such matters as budgeting, timing, information on facilities and resources will be included.


Samples of press releases and advertising will accompany an outline for using locally-accessible media to advantage.

Samples of agenda and hand-outs, and suggestions for follow-up and evaluation will provide ideas to assist in planning.

A bibliography on the topics studied in our series will serve as an example, and also suggest resources for similar groups.

A handbook of this sort stresses women helping themselves. Women's issues are valid subjects for study, yet few existing institutions in rural areas recognize this. With organization and work, using the resources available, women's studies projects can be carried out.

A manuscript of the handbook is in preparation, and will be ready by October, 1978.





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