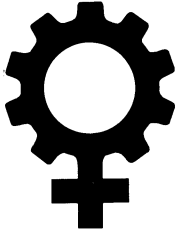


# The Fleck Women: A Victory for Workers and a Victory for Women

Ellen Tolmie



Dans ces deux articles on rapporte les expériences des femmes qui font la grève à Fleck.

Fran Piercey, Fleck striker:

I think that if you asked most of the women on the picket line they wouldn't know what women's liberation is. I know I wouldn't. But if you asked us if we believe that women should have equal pay for equal jobs with men, we believe in that. I'm quite proud that I'm a mother, a wife. I'm quite proud of the fact that I can run my home, look after my children, and hold down a job for eight and a half hours a day. . . .

. . . If a man ever came up and started being a chauvinist, say five months ago [some of the women] might break down and cry; now they would take him on with words and beat him at his own game. They are that much more sure of themselves. That way, yes, I guess they are women libbers. You better believe it.

The Fleck strike by women in Centralia, near London, Ont., 6 March to 14 August, 1978, represented not just a classic struggle for union recognition, but a focus for the issues facing women workers. The conditions that led the women to organize into Local 1620 of the United Auto Workers (UAW) and to strike — wages just above the minimum, machines without proper safeguards, rats, filthy washrooms, refusal to grant union security, and contemptuous and sexist treatment by management — graphically illustrate the secondary status of women in the labour force.

These conditions, barring sexism, are the same conditions that men face to a greater or lesser extent in Canadian factories. Yet the fact that the Fleck workers are women added a pervasive and unmistakable dimension to the strike that, in the end, gained for the women a broader support than that traditionally associated with union struggles.

Initially, the company and their apparently staunch supporters, the OPP, attempted to bully the women workers, counting on physical strength and the inexperience of the women in collective bargaining to intimidate the strikers. And initially the strategy worked.

On the last working day before the strike, while the leaders of the Fleck women were at the bargaining table, two male OPP officers visited the women in the plant and associated picket lines with the use of violent weapons such as baseball bats and knives. If the workers had been men or, as is more common with male workers, had seen a picket line before, these tactics would have been scorned. However, following the OPP's ap-

pearance, almost a third of the women, who had previously voted 99% in favour of striking, decided to remain in the plant as scabs.

Similarly, before the strikers had support on the picket line from male workers in other UAW locals in southwestern Ontario, male OPP used their physical disadvantage to break the picket lines by shoving the women and throwing them into surrounding snowbanks, frankly admitting that they considered the women easy targets. Ironically, this second attempt at intimidation tactics proved a turning-point in the strike.

It strengthened the resolve of the Fleck women to defend themselves and to continue the strike until better conditions, particularly union security, were negotiated. And the excessive police force used to protect scabs — throughout the strike, police escorts outnumbered the picketers about three to one, to the tune of nearly \$2 million in taxpayers' money — brought wide media attention to the strike. In turn, feminists rallied to support the Fleck women on the picket lines. Two busloads of women from Toronto set out at 4 a.m. in order to arrive at the plant before the police-escorted bus of scabbing workers tried to cross the lines.

Rather than making larger-than-life heroines out of these women, it is important to place their actions inside their real and fairly traditional lives. In this way, their courage and tenacity become more concrete and more commendable.

In this sense, the strike was a formative experience for many of these women. Marg Carroll, one of the strikers, said, 'The strike has given us a self-confidence that we never had before.



The women realize that they're capable people, knowledgeable people, more so than they ever thought before. It doesn't matter how this strike goes, we're going to be gainers by this experience, not losers.'

There is no doubt that the process of unionization is a deep experience for people who have never organized as a group before. When the Fleck women held their first union meeting, a different kind of socializing entered their lives. The UAW organizing representative, Lorna Moses, clearly indicated the process involved. Fran Piercey said, 'She told us what was what, she didn't promise anything, she told us that we join the union, we *are* the union, what we get, it's up to us.'

The decision to organize and, later, the decision to strike against a company that had a short but consistent history of union-busting, was a collective decision by working women that changed how they related to each other and to their bosses, and eventually put them under a media spotlight. Almost all aspects of their lives were affected by these decisions; new friendships were made and some old ones lost; a group solidarity emerged that redefined how they saw each other and themselves (the ties with other women became as strong as the ties with men); husbands and men friends became supporters on the picket line and in the home; baby-sitters had to be found for early morning picket lines and trips to Labour Board hearings in Toronto; new skills were learned in organizing meetings, plant-gate collections and other fundraisers; and the women learned to talk to and defend themselves with the police, various government representatives, top union leaders, and the media.

This was quite a change from being asked to perform only the dulling, repetitive tasks of factory-line production. One woman expressed the change like this: 'When I went out with my husband at night I used to have nothing to say. Now everyone talks to me, they want to find out what's going on with the strike.'

The strike gained wide publicity and support resulting from provincial government tie-ins to the Fleck company, and the hugely disproportionate presence of the OPP at the picket line. If the UAW initiatives which provoked the Ontario Labour Relations Board to permit the prosecution of the OPP and the company for their actions against the strikers (some of the charges were precedent-setting) contributed to the workers' victory, the victory, nonetheless, belongs unequivocally to the Fleck women. They were the centre of the struggle. They faced the cops on the picket lines. They testified at the hearings. And they fought together. Their victory is a model for all workers — men and women — who fight against shoddy work conditions and contemptuous treatment.

Although their success was very real, the history of Fleck's dealings with unions, and the history of women workers, suggest that the fight is by no means over.

Now the women are back working in the plant and housekeeping in the home, but they are different, stronger women than before. Because they are ordinary women, their victory is for all of us.

