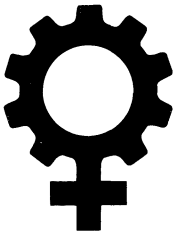
Fleck: The Unionization of Women

Wendy Cuthbertson



The working conditions were unspeakable: rats, filthy washrooms, suffocating dust levels, ancient machinery that burned and mutilated, grotesque sexual and psychological harassment. The factory itself was a converted World War Two hangar.

The remuneration was no better. A woman's starting salary was $2.65 an hour, rising to the princely sum of $3.24 after *ten years of service.* In the meantime, male workers at the plant (called 'skilled labour' because, in the caustic words of their female co-workers, 'They're handy with twist ties') were making more than $5.00 an hour.

There were no fringe benefits to speak of.

That was the situation at Fleck Manufacturing, a small auto-parts plant in Centralia, Ont., employing about 130 people, almost all women, when the United Auto Workers (UAW) organized the plant in October 1977. From the start, the company was not prepared to accept the union. Within months, negotiations had broken down and the Fleck women struck the plant.

It's a story that is repeated countless times across this country every year, but one that few people ever hear about. Most of the labour struggles that Fleck typifies are fought – and won or lost – in anonymity. However, the Fleck strike constantly made the headlines because of the unprecedented involvement of the Ontario Provincial Police in harassing the strikers, and because of the link, through Deputy Minister James Fleck, between the company and the Ontario government. These headlines publicized in a dramatic and unforgettable way the plight of thousands of workers – especially women workers.

Fleck Manufacturing is almost a classic study of the anti-woman, union-hating firm operating slightly beyond what we would like to think of as normal twentieth-century labour practices. The firm, like so many others of its kind, intentionally hires women only, although it does reserve a very few better-paying jobs for men. These firms operate on the correct assumption that only women would accept such low wages and such dreadful working conditions. 'The company treated us like dirt,' said one striker. 'No man would work for the wages we worked for.' Women are viewed very consciously by these small, marginal operators, as a large pool of cheap, docile labour, easily exploited and easily intimidated. Cheap female labour is a component of their profit calculations. It constitutes the 'ghettoization' of women at its worst. Since low-wage female workers are regarded as no less vital to the corporate profit picture than stable commodity prices or effective advertising, the company will fight aggressively to make sure that women workers' oppression is permanent.

Not surprisingly, when faced with the prospect of a union's organizing their workers, these firms react like maddened bulls. Their hatred and distrust of unions borders on the fanatical. Since their profit levels, in many cases, have been increased beyond all reason by the exclusive employment of female labour, they fear unionization more than almost anything else. Their campaigns against unions are usually vicious and devious, sometimes in complete violation of the labour code. Because men will not work for the shameful wages offered by companies like Fleck Manufacturing, they rarely end up working for backwater, union-hating outfits like Fleck. Consequently, labour struggles involving the organizing of men are rarely as bitter and as protracted as those involving the organizing of women.

There are other reasons why the unionization of women is resisted so strenuously by male employers. Male managers, accustomed to swaggering around, frightening and abusing women, face the prospect of having to deal with a union instead. The implicit sexual power derived from this type of authority is undercut when such authority is circumscribed by formal procedures for bargaining and labour relations. Furthermore, the seniority system and the grievance procedure at the heart of any union contract discourage the use of sexual threat or intimidation as the carrot and stick of employee management. 'A promotion was unlikely,' said one Fleck striker, 'unless you let them pinch you.' Male management also becomes intensely antagonistic and reacts personally when women reject the paternalism offered by the 'We're all part of the same big family, girls' line and opt, instead, for the *real* protection of a union. It's inconceivable that men organizing would tap such emotional depths in their managers, but the unionization of women, for too many male managers, isn't business, it's personal.

The usual strategy of firms like Fleck in their attempts to resist unionization is to refuse to negotiate with the union in good faith, watch negotiations break down, and then sit out the resulting strike – often importing strikebreakers or hiring scabs.

In this sense, Fleck was a textbook case. From the start it was clear that the company had decided to break the union. Negotiations started in October 1977, with the company offering a ten-cent-an-hour wage increase, no improvement in benefits or working conditions, no cost-of-living increase, and no pensions. This package alone would have been hard enough for the union to swallow, but Fleck went even further. It refused to negotiate union security: compulsory dues checkoff.

Grant Truner, the company's vice-president, said that his opposition to union security was a matter of principle; he believed in the workers 'right not to pay union dues'. The union on the other hand, saw the checkoff as a necessity for its survival.

And it is. If a union is spending all its time maintaining membership levels, collecting dues, heading off management attempts to pit non-union members against union members, it cannot get down to the business of providing services for its members. The checkoff is not to satisfy a union greedy for dues dollars. It is to guarantee the right of employees to be represented by a union; without the checkoff in the first contract, any union that manages to organize in these primitive factories will not survive management attempts to destroy it.

The union-security issue in the Fleck strike, of course, raises the question of why a union is so important to women workers. When feminists came to the support of the Fleck women, intrigued journalists asked what an arcane issue like union security had to do with the struggle of women. The answer is all too clear. The vast majority of working women are unorganized and underpaid, many of them working in sweat-shop conditions. Without the protection of a union fighting for better wages and working conditions, they will continue to be exploited. Without a union women do not have the seniority system to give them job security. Without a union they do not have the grievance procedure to protect their rights and dignity on the job. Individuals who protest exploitive and unfair labour practices can easily be fired; women protesting in a solid front are less easily intimidated or fired.

The Fleck women's fight for their union lasted for five months. The company capitulated only after the UAW had been given the go-ahead by the Ontario Labour Relations Board (OLRB) to prosecute the police and the company for their highly questionable tactics. (See the other Fleck story in this issue.) This OLRB decision, the massive picket-line support from other UAW locals, trade unions, and feminist groups, the pressure from the NDP on the government, and the constant media attention were too much for the company.

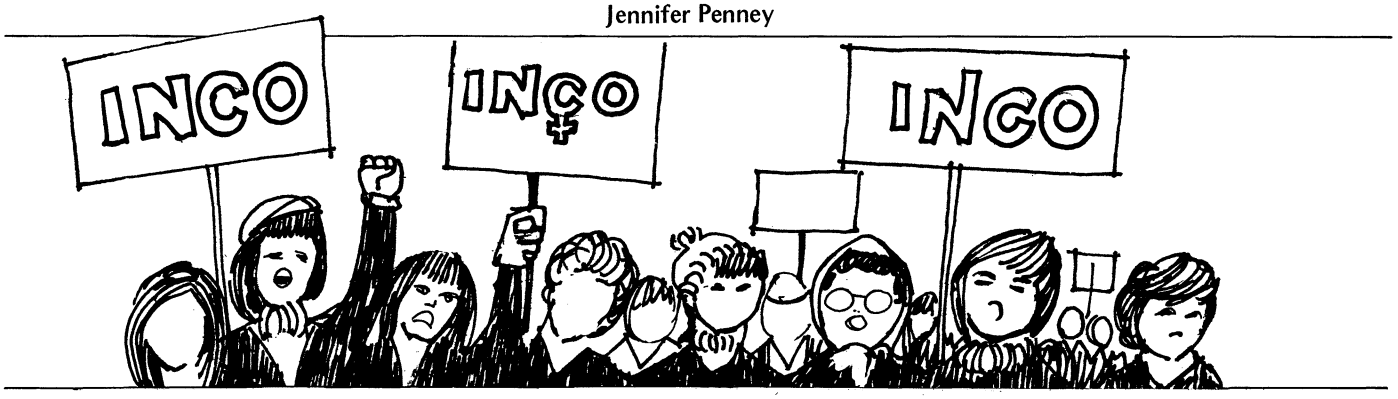
There was another significant factor in this round one victory: the Fleck women's determination to win. They displayed a tenacity and resilience shown by few unionists, especially ones so green. Much of their fire came from their keenly felt responsibility to other women. Very quickly, and without any great 'consciousness-raising' exercises, the Fleck women realized that in their strike more was at stake than simply defeating Fleck's attempt to destroy their union. 'Why, if we hadn't won it,' said bargaining committee member, Sheila Charlton, 'we would have let down all those other women who were counting on us. That was the scariest thing, that responsibility.' The directness of the Fleck women's feeling of sisterhood with other women workers made the strike credible as a *women's* fight. These were not urban feminists, educated and schooled in women's issues. They saw themselves, in the main, as housewives leading fairly traditional lives. They called each other 'girls', and made sandwiches for male picket-line reinforcements. However, their determination to win their strike for *all* women was explicit, concerted, and absolute.

The Fleck women still have a battle ahead of them. Their contract, while granting union security, is still pretty thin on economic benefits. 'We've got a long way to go on wages and working conditions,' remarked Fran Piercey, chairperson of the bargaining committee. 'All we've done is stay alive. Now we've got to face the scabs and deal with management day by day. The fight has just begun.'

The fight has just recently begun for all women who claim as their right fair, safe, and dignified living conditions – within the workforce and without. One of the major obstacles against us is those women who assert, 'I believe in equal pay for equal work, but . . . ' filling in any number of clichéd disclaimers which distance them from feminists fully committed to women's rights. Such women should look again at the example supplied by the Fleck women who had every reason to focus only on the wage issue. Instead, they demonstrated with courage and profound generosity that they believe in equal pay for equal work *and* . . . they believe in women – more than any disclaimer and more than any 'but' dividing us.

Women at Inco: SPEAKOUT

Jennifer Penney



Ceci est un entrevue avec les femmes de Inco.

Among the eleven thousand steelworkers who are employed by the International Nickel Company (Inco) in Sudbury, Ont., there are about thirty women. Their work is dirty, often hard, sometimes dangerous but they've shown that women can do work in heavy industry. It hasn't been easy for most of them. Management, foremen, and fellow workers have all been skeptical about the women's working out. Some have been downright hostile and have gone out of their way to make things difficult. But, so far, the women have stuck it out.

The women are scattered throughout the huge Inco complex. Forbidden by the provincial Mining Act from entering the mines, they work in the various mills, smelters, and refineries. The women are a tiny minority in each work-site and they often work in isolation from one another. Despite such difficulties they have made a number of gains. They formed a Women's Committee within the union local (Local 6500, United Steelworkers of America), and have established a presence within the local membership. One of them is also a representative on the Ontario Federation of Labour Women's Committee. Seve-