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.

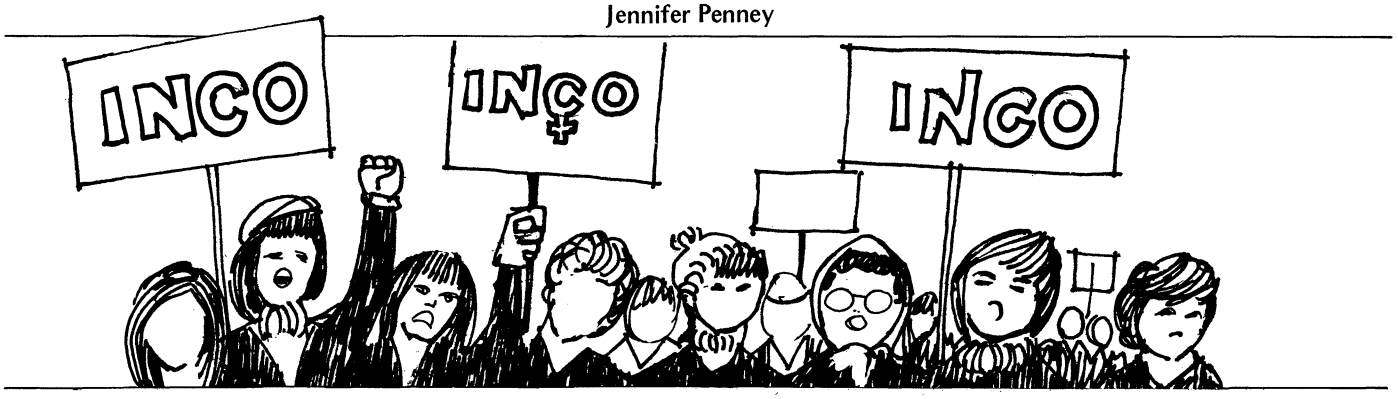
There was another significant factor in this round one victory: the Fleck women's determination to win. They displayed a tenacity and resilience shown by few unionists, especially ones so green. Much of their fire came from their keenly felt responsibility to other women. Very quickly, and without any 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-

ral of the women have been working on safety and health issues, and two are active on the safety committees in their work areas.

This summer I interviewed two of these women. What follows are excerpts from discussions with Rachel Barriault and Shirley Hawes, who both work at Inco.

J.P.: *How did women first get into work at Inco?*

Rachel: In the summer of '74, Inco made a decision to hire women. They hired about a hundred over a period of about two years, but mostly in the latter part of '74. It was prior to International Women's Year and Inco wanted to make a big splash. They continued to hire in '75 but after the big publicity campaign was over it stopped. It was just tokenism. They've hardly hired any women since 1975.

Was that the beginning of the slowdown when they weren't hiring anyone?

Rachel: No. They were still hiring men.

Shirley: Not that there was a shortage of applications. We heard that over two thousand women applied!

What kind of women were hired?

Rachel: There was a cross-section, some older women, some younger, married, single mothers and so on. I was hired along with one woman who is about forty-five. We were hired to work in surface jobs—in the mills, the smelters, and the copper and nickel refineries.

What kind of jobs have you done since you were hired?

Shirley: Everyone starts as a labourer in what they call the 'bull gang'. I was out at the mill in Levack [a small town outside Sudbury]. There were twelve of us women working out there. Basically, I was on the shovel at Levack, shovelling concentrate off the floor, stuff that fell off the belts, and so on. I trained on pretty well every job while I was at the Levack mill. I was on the crane, crushers, pumps, filters.

Can you describe those jobs?

Shirley: Well, on the crane you work in a cab up near the roof. The crane goes along the length of the mill. You take signals from the bellman down below and operate the crane, change crushers, move rod mills, just everything. It's a skilled job. You have to go through a break-in period, a special crane medical before you're able to get it. The crushers you control with a panel, and only let so much ore through at a time or it will bog them down. When you're a car loader you jack up railway cars to load them with ore. You're moving them into position. It's all on computer. The only thing physical there is jacking up the cars. As a pumpman you look after the pumps and hoses. These jobs are all at different rates of pay.

What makes you go from one to another? Are you going up a ladder of more and more skilled jobs and more money?

Shirley: It depends on yourself how much you move. I try to break in on different jobs. I like the variety.

Rachel: I worked first in the hot-metal section of the smelter where the metal was melted down and poured into ladles. One woman trained on the crane but never got a job on them. We hosed down floors, shovelled. We worked around conveyor belts which carried the ore for crushing, and later transferred it to refineries or for loading in railway cars to be transported. It's very dusty work quite often. We have to shovel fallen ore back on to the conveyor belts. There are drop points where the ore is dropped off the belts. These areas get plugged up quite frequently. We use bars, sledgehammers, air lines and so on to clear these plugs. When I worked in the hot metal, I took samples from hot matter (the more purified molten metal) with an iron spoon. These samples were taken to the lab for analysis. I also took temperatures of the molten metal. What I used to do was to load and unload boxcars and transport trucks, containers, and also carry pallets of drums of the finished product off the conveyor belts and either stack them in the stockpile area or just load them directly onto trucks. I really enjoyed it.

What kinds of problems have you run into as women?

Shirley: I was denied a job posting in Clarabelle mill because of facilities. They've had four years to put them in there, and they haven't gone ahead and done anything yet.

You mean washrooms?

Shirley: They have washrooms upstairs for secretaries, so it's just a shower. They truck people at Inco all over the place. They can truck me to Levack, which is only a mile, or they can build a shower. I've lost at the first stage (grievance procedure). It's going to second stage now. We're going to Human Rights. They have a right to set up a board and call

Inco in on it. They can't deny me because of qualifications. It's just the facilities. I'll be losing out on a rate increase. Why should I lose money for them?

Rachel: They took me off work at the IPC because of the antidote they administer for nickel carbonyl poisoning. They suspected it might have an effect on the fetus. So I had been working there six months and they took me off.

Can you describe more about the nickel carbonyl processes and what the problem is with them, and why there's this antidote?

Rachel: Well, carbonyl is really the breaking down of nickel with carbon-monoxide process. What they do is they turn the nickel into small particles and they have pipes running across the plant, and that's how they transport the nickel in gas form from one area to another. And what happens occasionally is that the pipes will leak for various reasons, and they have monitors that will detect this in the control room, and the workers who work there are trained to isolate the problem and correct it. But it's deadly stuff. Carbonyl poisoning is a lot like carbon-monoxide poisoning where it's something you can't smell, you can't taste, you can't detect it. What may happen is that you develop a headache and nausea, and if you're exposed long enough you can't breathe. We've had a few cases go to hospital. Nickel carbonyl also causes cancer. Anyway, if you're exposed they administer this antidote 'dithiocarb'. What it does is help you excrete the carbonyl from your bloodstream. It binds it. But they don't know what effect it might have on a fetus. Apparently, there's also a strong possibility that children of women exposed to nickel carbonyl might be born without eyes, or born blind. There's more research going on into that.

Is there any chance that this affects men? the genes in men as well?

Rachel: This is my feeling. It has very serious implications when they start barring women from certain areas of industry for safety and health reasons, especially if it's for the reason of danger to the offspring. The whole thing with the antidote was that if you were pregnant and were administered the antidote, it would affect the fetus. When you go on this antidote, you could be on this pill for five days, so that if a man was to get his partner pregnant at that time, wouldn't that affect the fetus? Because it gets in the bloodstream. So that there's a possibility there. Although the company denies it. They just don't like to hear about it. And that makes me even a little bit more suspicious. They really get upset when you bring this up. The whole thing is, for them, how would the public react if a woman who was working in the IPC gave birth to a deformed child? I'm sure that in this case Inco is really worried about its image.

Are there any other serious kinds of health problems you have run into on your job?

Rachel: The biggest problem where I work is being barred from jobs. In the IPC and the IPC-related jobs, some of the best jobs in the plant, the highest-paying jobs are IPC-related, which means that at some point in your job you will have to enter the IPC, pick up a sample or just have something to do with the IPC. These jobs, like sampling, working in the lab, are basically good jobs. And also in transportation, working in transportation, driving the boom truck, driving the equipment, the fork lifts and that kind of thing, where they now and again have to pick up loads and go on the trackmobile, move boxcars and that kind of thing, hoppers. Personally, we feel that when you're working the transportation area you do enter the IPC but you enter in well-ventilated areas. And we feel that we should have the right to decide whether we should work there or not. And I feel that the company is taking a very, very paternalistic attitude toward the women there. They're telling us, 'We're doing this for your own good. We know you don't like it but we want to protect you.' As if to say that we're not smart enough to protect ourselves. I mean, we're grown-up women and I'm sure that none of us would jeopardize our lives and the lives of our babies just to work there.

Has there been any other substance besides this nickel carbonyl and the antidote that have been shown in the smelter to be a problem, or said to be a problem for women?

Rachel: The precious-metals section at Inco is barred to women. But those are the only two areas that I know of that are barred to women.

What's the argument used to bar women from precious metals?

Rachel: Well, the last I heard, we haven't been doing too much about that because nobody wants to work there in the first place. However, the question had been put to the company before, a woman enquiring about the precious-metals section, and they told us that they didn't have the 'facilities' there, and it would cost too much money to install them, and if we wanted to work at Inco we could work elsewhere, that kind of thing. So we haven't dwelt on that too much because if the women don't really want to work there it puts us in a bad position to challenge the company.

How have the reactions of the men you work with been to women coming on the job?

Rachel: (*She laughs.*) It was awful. Nobody wanted us there. Nobody took us seriously. It was a big joke. And the guys would say to me, 'In six months you'll be gone. This is no place for a woman.' And a lot of the wives of the men workers were totally disgusted to see women going in. It had always been a male-dominated industry. I remember in 1958 when the Queen came to Sudbury. I was just a kid then. Well, they wanted to bring her on a tour underground and the men threatened to walk out because they thought that a woman underground would bring them bad luck. And that's not very long ago—1958. We're having a real hassle with this. We're hoping when Inco rehires to put some pressure on them to hire more women. And, of course, that would mean a change in the Mining Act to allow women to go underground. And I personally feel there's no reason why a woman couldn't work underground. They're working underground in the U.S. and other places. And physical strength is relative in a person. You get strong women and you also get weak men and vice versa. But we're having a real problem with the men workers. I don't know how many of them would back us up, and how far they'll go to back us up because they're really convinced that it's no place for a woman. 'It's bad enough that *we men* have to go down there without women going down there.' And sometimes when I talk to them I'm able to sway them a little. I say, 'Well, look with the terrible conditions underground.' (They still use garbage cans for toilets and that kind of thing.) 'They're going to have to clean up their act if women go underground.' I'm sure that women would put up a hell of a good fight for them to clean up some of these conditions. Whereas the men have put up with these things for so long that they probably tend to be a little bit more tolerant. And something else, too, I tell them. 'When you think of women, you think of motherhood. Think how concerned Inco will be about having the first woman die underground. Can you imagine the outcry of the public? The pressure would really be on them at that point to really clean up their conditions and safety.'

Have you had problems with foremen?

Yeah, on my first job I worked for this real bastard. He was the shift boss. He used to say things to me like, 'Doesn't your conscience bother you, working here? There's some guy out

on the street with a family to feed and here you are. You don't even weigh a hundred pounds soaking wet and taking a man's job.' And on and on. We usually worked in pairs and he would take the guys aside and say to them, 'She wants to work here. Let her do the work. Take it easy.' And he would tell them that I was ripping off the company because I wasn't pulling my weight. And I'd put up with this for months and got sick of it. One night I went to the Steelworkers Hall. I was sitting at home, just a few blocks from the hall, and I was just fuming, seven o'clock at night. I was working steady days, and they work business hours at the Hall, so it was hard for me to get down there to complain during the day. The stewards at the plant weren't doing anything to help me out either. They just didn't want to hear about it. Anyway, I went to the Hall. This is downstairs where they have a lounge, a beer-parlour kind of setup. I didn't know anybody but there's a few guys sitting in the corner, into a heavy union discussion, so I walked over to the table and I introduced myself. So they all get up (*she laughs*) to let me sit down. So, anyway, I told them about my problem. One of the guys happened to be a chief steward in the operations section. By the time we had talked it was about nine o'clock in the evening but he called up the industrial relations guy at my plant and told him to get this foreman off my ass or else they would bring charges.

And from there they got him straightened around.

Shirley: I haven't had the same kind of problems. In Levack, we came from a small town. Quite a few people who worked there lived in the area. You'd pretty well know everybody. They were just like friends. Most of them were friends of your father. You had a daughter image. They didn't give you a hard time, we never really had a problem like they had in other areas. We had more help. A lot of men said no woman could ever operate the crane, though. That no man would ever work under a woman crane operator. I got it and there was no problem. There was one guy who came in on an afternoon shift and I was on the crane. He went to my foreman and said, 'What have you got her up there for?' 'She's our craneman on the shift.' So he went and talked to the mechanics. And they said, 'No, we don't mind her working up there. She's okay up there.' So he watched me for the whole shift, just waiting for me to do something wrong. When I came down he said, 'You know, I was upset with you being up there, but I never found anything wrong. You can operate it pretty good.' Never had any more problem with him. It was just the initial reaction of anyone who came in the plant who wasn't used to being there would just kind of gawk at you up there, being on a job like that.

They didn't want women on the bull gang in Levack, either, but when I was on day shift and the bull gang was short, they'd get me on it. It's hard work but once you do it a while you get used to it. I'd unload the barrels when they came in, and somebody would be having a fit, but there were no problems.

How much do they weigh?

Shirley: Oh, I don't know. They are great big barrels filled with liquid. You don't actually lift them. You tip them on a cart and wheel them away.

So it's a matter of technique rather than brute strength?

Shirley: Partly, though some of the women wouldn't be able to do it, I guess. But neither would some of the men.

Have the men's attitudes to you changed now you've been there for four years?

Rachel: Oh yeah. Well, they accept me now there—like one of the guys. But, you know, when I ask them out of curiosity to check how they are feeling now compared to how they were feeling before, what they think of women working here now, they still say, 'I don't like it. I still don't think it's any place for a woman. It's okay for you. You're one of the guys.' But they're not as hostile as they used to be. They have started to accept it slowly.

You are all active in the union. Can you describe how that happened?

Rachel: Before I went to work at Inco, I worked at St Joe's Hospital in Sudbury and I was a member of CUPE [the Canadian Union of Public Employees] then, and I was a steward. But, before that, my father has always been a strong union man, very active, so I was brought up with that. He's also a strong socialist. So I've always been interested. It's really funny, the first union meeting I went to with the Steelworkers. The meeting was scheduled a couple of weeks after I'd hired on. I brought two other women out with me. And the cards hadn't come back to the hall. We'd sent them but they hadn't been received yet. Well, they did let us in, but what a joke! They'd never had women sitting at a union meeting before. This was really a big deal. We signed in, walked in and sat down, and then, just before the meeting was to come to order, the guard comes up to us and he asks us to leave. I got really upset and said that I was a member and that there was no way that I was going to leave. I told him my dues had been taken off my cheque and, as a matter of fact, that I had my pay stub here. That kind of thing. That was my first experience at a Steelworkers' union meeting. The other two women didn't want to go back after that. It wasn't exactly the welcome wagon.

Shirley: I was interested in the union right from the start. One of the guys was always talking union and I'd listen to all different stories about different grievances. When I had the opportunity I joined the safety and health committee, and from there I started going to union meetings. It was basically through safety and health though. That was my main concern.

Was there any particular thing that was going on in your mill that you were interested in finding out more about?

Shirley: The bad dust system we had there, the chemicals. I got a book out about the chemicals we had there and the hazardous conditions. There was lime in the air. The worst was around the welders. They were repairing equipment all over the mill, and the fumes and gases they were breathing were terrible. There weren't good vent systems, so, depending on where they were welding, the other workers would be exposed too.

What about dust from the ores being milled?

Shirley: The worst dust was from the crusher area, where it would be crushed and then go into a bad bag system. They've had a new system put in since then. It cost the company a hundred and forty thousand dollars. Now they've closed down the mill. They fix it up and then it's down.

How does the health and safety committee work?

Shirley: Once a month we have a tour with the safety engineer. Everyone on the committee took a turn going on tour with the guy. We toured the mill, the sand plant, the rock house. Anything we would find we would write down. If there was scrap lumber around, a tripping hazard, we would make an order to clean up. Or wires or faulty steps, or anything like that, we wrote down. At the end of our tour, we brought it to our superintendent and mechanical super, and this was a few days before our regular meeting, and by the day of our meeting they would usually have everything pretty well cleaned up, or set a date for when they were fixing it if they couldn't get it done immediately.

Were you the only woman on that committee?

Shirley: Yes.

Did anything ever come up about reproductive hazards for women?

Shirley: Not really, no.

As a woman on the safety committee did you run into any problems or hassles with people or were you treated as just one of the regular members?

Shirley: In Levack it was good. I was treated as an equal. But in Copper Cliff I haven't been able to get into a safety meeting yet. I'm an alternate right now. If you move from one plant to another, it's a five-man committee; the company and the union each has five people on it, and if you're an alternate you go if some regular member of the committee can't make it or is on holidays or something. But so far I haven't been able to do that.

You're both on the women's committee as well. Can you explain how the women's committee got started?

Rachel: Well, when I first got active in the union I joined the Human Rights committee. But then I couldn't get much done there. I was the only woman active in it. There were a few stewards, I think, but they weren't working in my plant and I never saw them. They worked on so many committees. I was the only person who was really bitching about the discrimination. I got the impression that we would have more clout if we established a women's committee. Because, as women, we have problems that are peculiar to women and, as women, we know these problems, and I felt it was best to organize this kind of a committee. But I was feeling so isolated I couldn't get anything done. One day I went to see Dave Patterson [president of the local] about something or other, and there was a woman sitting in his office, complaining about the hassles she had at work with her bosses and her stewards and the guys. And he says to me, 'How long have I been telling you to set up a women's committee? Why don't you do it?' And from there, that's what I did, set up the women's committee. And the initial meeting went very well, although I had a lot of problems just organizing it. They have us listed at the Hall by last name and first two initials. So there's no way of telling from the list who is a woman and who is a man. The only way we could contact these women was by having posters up in different plants. But a lot of these posters were ripped off the walls or defaced. So we didn't get to all the women who were working there. At the first meeting, a night meeting, we had about thirty women show up.

Shirley: The posters weren't ripped down in our area. But most of the women there are married and have families and maybe have never seen the inside of a union hall. And, where we were, we didn't have much discrimination. We heard it was just a women's lib group that were troublemakers, bringing up stupid things. I felt that way and, at first, I wasn't involved either. Later I started going to the Hall and met Rachel and got into it that way.

Other than dealing with the particular problems of sexism that women were running into at the plant, did you try to use the meetings to deal with other things, like getting women more active in the union generally?

Rachel: Yes. At the initial meeting, that's what I spoke on, said we should join the different committees and become active in the union because it is our union, and that's the only way we're going to develop clout. The thing that concerned me most is that I had been talking to the industrial relations guy at my plant, and it was his opinion that the company was really dissatisfied with the women that they had hired. He said we abuse a lot of the benefits, take time off, you know.

Did he use any statistics to back it up?

Rachel: No. The whole thing is that, in his opinion, he didn't feel that the company would be hiring any more women. So I thought we should build up a good solid women's committee, get the support of the male members behind us, and put some pressure on Inco to hire more women. But then we started the committee in March '77. And, of course, the fall came and there was this big layoff. So we couldn't do anything around their hiring practices.

And there was a large number of women laid off at that time?

Rachel: Yes. We had lower seniority in a lot of cases. But we can't tell how many were laid off, again because of the lists using initials for first names.

Were women that you worked with laid off?

Rachel: Oh yes. There were four in my plant.

Shirley: My sister was laid off, and another woman. My sister didn't have quite two years.

So that made quite a dent in the numbers of women who could be a part of your women's committee?

Shirley: Right now we're down to about thirty women at Inco, scattered all over. And the problem with getting women out to meetings is that they have more commitments than men do. They have a house to keep up and a family to look after. They're away all day from them. It's hard to leave them again at night. And then there's shift work. You can never set up a meeting that everyone or even most people can make. So many are on afternoon shift, when our meetings are held. Plus some of them have husbands who don't want them going out to meetings. Some of them say to me, 'Jeez, my husband will kill me if I went to one of these meetings.'

Rachel: We would talk about the specific grievances that we had. A lot of these women had never belonged to a union before. A lot of them had never worked before. A lot of them had worked for minimum wage. So they were glad to get a job at Inco and didn't know their rights under the contract. Afraid to make waves. It makes things very difficult because they're getting screwed around, and they'll tell you the whole story. But then, when it gets around to naming names, their bosses and so on, they're scared. It makes it hard to build up a solid case.

Shirley: Where I was working the women would hear from everyone surrounding them, 'Jeez, you're lucky to work for Inco and make that kind of money.' All they've heard is how lucky they are. They're on a pedestal. They're out in the world making this kind of money and no-one else is. So we overlook all kinds of things. We're just so thankful for having that kind of job.

Rachel: Sure, I still get it all the time. 'It's pretty good money *for a woman.*'

And I guess that in Sudbury the other kinds of jobs which are available for women are pretty low-paying?

Rachel: There are no jobs right now. We're lucky to have a job, period. Never mind the money.

Is that because of the layoffs?

Rachel: There have never been jobs for women in Sudbury.

Shirley: Everywhere you go, women are married and not working, or leaving for Toronto to look for work. You get out of school and there's just nothing in the area.

Did the women's committee get a lot of support from the local union executive? I know Dave Patterson seems to have been supportive.

Shirley: There's a few others. You can count and name pretty well everybody who has given us some support. But anything we brought to a membership meeting was contested and questioned and questioned over again.

Rachel: I don't know how many times I got up to speak on behalf of the women's committee. The biggest hassle that I remember really shocked the hell out of me. We had sent in resolutions for one OFL [Ontario Federation of Labour] Convention, and they have to be passed by the membership. There was one that set up the Women's Committee [of the OFL]. And I thought we were going to get some flak on that. But it wasn't too bad. A few guys got up and asked a few questions and it went okay. But the second one was asking for child care. And I thought, 'Who was going to contest child care?' But, as soon as they put it forward, about a dozen guys got up to speak on this issue and they were really belligerent. They would say, 'I'll be goddamned if the state is going to take care of my kids' and all this. 'These women got kids – they should be at home. They got no business working if they can't look after their kids at home.' One of the guys on the executive board, he gets up and says, 'The reason that there's this problem with inflation now is because women are working. And, whereas a family would bring in fifteen thousand, now they're bringing in thirty thousand, and that's boosting the cost of living.' And this kind of thing. And everybody was saying, 'Yeah, yeah, that's right.' The whole crowd was going along with it. 'Gee, I never thought about it. But, gee, that's true, you know.' So I had to get up and say, 'Well, what about the guy who's driving a cab and whose wife has to work as a waitress in a restaurant? Shouldn't they be allowed to have child care?' So what happened is they asked for an amendment to the resolution, saying that child care should be made available to single mothers only. So I had to get up again and speak against this amendment because it was very discriminatory. I sit on the Human Rights committee and all these guys from the committee were saying nothing! So I had to embarrass the hell out of them. I had to say, 'Where are the Human Rights people? This is downright discrimination. Why aren't you guys standing up and speaking against this?' But that's another problem. There's such a cleavage between men and women workers there. On previous occasions, when something was brought up and a guy would get up and speak on our behalf, well, there would be all this heckling, all kinds of putdowns and hassles for supporting the women, so now they're scared. None of these guys want to get up . . . .

Shirley: They'll support secretively, but not out in the open, not saying, 'Well, I agree with them.' They save themselves a lot of flak.

So have most of your motions that have come before the membership as a whole failed because of that?

Rachel: No. We manage to get them through mostly, just with a lot of trouble. It's a question of appealing to their sense of justice. For everything that we've wanted, if we didn't get up there and embarrass the hell out of them, we didn't get it. If we put in a recommendation to the Board, and one of us wasn't there to speak on it, it wouldn't pass. We had to make sure we were there, and be ready to state our case.

Shirley: The thing is that when other issues are brought before meetings by men, almost nothing gets questioned. When it comes to a women's issue, well, everybody wants to question, to disagree.

Has this constant kind of struggle been demoralizing to you?

Rachel: Yeah. At this point, I don't know which way to go. I don't know what the answer is. I'm involved now with this group in town, Women Helping Women, and it's really a great organization, really great women. I get a lot of moral-boosting there. I find an organization like that important because the main function of these groups is to develop an awareness in women, develop their consciousness. Unless they have developed this consciousness, there's no way they can organize, because they don't understand. They know there's something wrong. They know they're being shafted. But they don't really understand the whole problem, the whole exploitation system, which turns men against women and vice versa. And you put yourself in a situation like I have, like Shirley has, and they look at you as antagonizing and polarizing the work force. Like Cathy, we had a really hard time getting Cathy to join the women's committee. She's good, strong, a solid union person. She attends the union meetings regularly. She does a lot of work at her plant, she fights grievances and stuff like that.

Shirley: She is interested in safety and health.

Rachel: But I approached her on many occasions, whenever I'd see her, and mention the women's committee. But she would say it's polarizing the workers, that our problems were the same problems as the men and we should be working with the men to solve our problems.

So women who form groups are seen as polarizing the work force rather than sexism doing the polarization, and women having to work together to overcome that?

Shirley: I finally got her to join when we needed help for International Women's Day. Setting up different booths and stuff. I talked to her and asked her about joining. So she said she was willing to help, but she was hesitant about joining because of the women's lib thing. That's all it was. I've talked to her since. The main thing we've been doing is fighting for things, pregnancy leave, and benefits, and stuff that was beneficial to all, and she didn't realize that. And, listening to me – she didn't find that I was a real women's libber. We were both in safety and health and went to school in Hamilton. Then she said she'd join.

Rachel: I'd like to go into the background of the problems that the women's group is facing. We organized it in March 1977 and it was going fine. You know, with the initial meeting we had thirty women out there and very enthusiastic. I left to go to the labour college. After I was gone, there was an executive meeting of the committee. And all these women show up and are resigning from the committee. When I came back two months later, I tried to find out what had happened. Apparently the women were becoming really involved in this thing and were going to work and talking about it, and the guys at work were turning against them. There was this hostility because they looked at it as a women's lib group . . . .

Shirley: Women versus men, and they started getting hassled . . .

Janet Sadel

So the men had this whole media stereotype of women's liberation as an anti-male kind of thing?

Rachel: Well, I suppose that they think that when we get together we talk about men, and put down men.

Shirley: But then, when you talk to them about the issues, like pregnancy leave, a lot of them weren't aware that you didn't have benefits while you were laid off. And that you were cut off your hospitalization, prescriptions, all these things. And they're all in agreement that you should get it . . . .

Rachel: No. I don't think that's right.

Shirley: Well, in my plant they were supportive. They said you should be collecting, or not cut off.

Rachel: I've been getting the opposite response from the people at my plant and even the people at the Hall, where they say to me, 'Well, she's not working, she's not producing for the company. Why should she be getting any money?' But, I mean, you could say the same thing about pensions, once you go on pension you're not producing for the company any more. Or compensation, or sick leave, or anything else like that.

Shirley: But we haven't had the hassles at our plant. They aren't opposed to us from the beginning. So, if we have anything to say they're listening to us with an open mind. And they're not as easily opposed to anything we say.

There must be problems for women who are less confident than you are, who would maybe like to do something, but are afraid of getting singled out.

Rachel: *We* lack confidence like you wouldn't believe!

Shirley: We don't have it. *(She laughs).*

Rachel: Like none of us have ever taken public speaking. And we go to a membership meeting, and we caucus before and decide to speak on this or that, and it's a real hassle. 'Well, you talk, I talked the last time.' 'Me speak? You've got to be kidding! I'd freeze.'

Shirley: We pass the buck something awful.

Rachel: And I'm standing up there, and I shake like a leaf and my knees are shaking like this and I lean like this so that nobody is going to notice. Or keep my hands in my pockets because I'm shaking too much.

Don't you find it easier as you go along?

Rachel: No. I hate it.

Shirley: That's what I've decided to do in the fall, take public speaking, because, without her, I'm going to be the only one who says much. [Rachel is taking next year off work to travel.] Myself, I just ran for the international convention and got it. Ever a lot of opposition to that! A lot of talk anyway. They can't do anything about it because I got the votes to go. But they say, 'She's only been involved for a couple of years and she never does anything . . .' But I can't get into the stewards' body. There's no opening. There's three already in the mill. So if you're not a steward, you're not involved, eh? Even though I'm on six committees.

Rachel: It's the same old political trip. Always a jockeying for position. And, of course, women who become active like Shirley, they see her as a threat.

Shirley: Only twenty-two made it for the International Convention. Forty-six ran and twenty-two go. That's at Atlantic City in September.

Rachel: But the kind of stuff that goes on . . . I was doing a bit of campaigning for her and putting in a good word, and saying make sure you vote for Shirley, and the kind of stuff I was getting. 'Why should I vote for her? What has she done for the labour movement?' They treat these conferences and conventions like a reward. They shouldn't be a reward. They are an educational experience. And you should be there as a representative of your local to have some input in what's happening.

Shirley: I'm at the Hall on my own time. I'm not a steward. The different committees I'm on are all on my own time. The biggest opposition you get is from the ones who are only at the Hall on paid time. Don't get me wrong. There are really good, dedicated people around here. And when one of them gives you praise, you feel good about it. Without them, it would be hard to keep going on.

Rachel: That's the battle now, to keep going on.