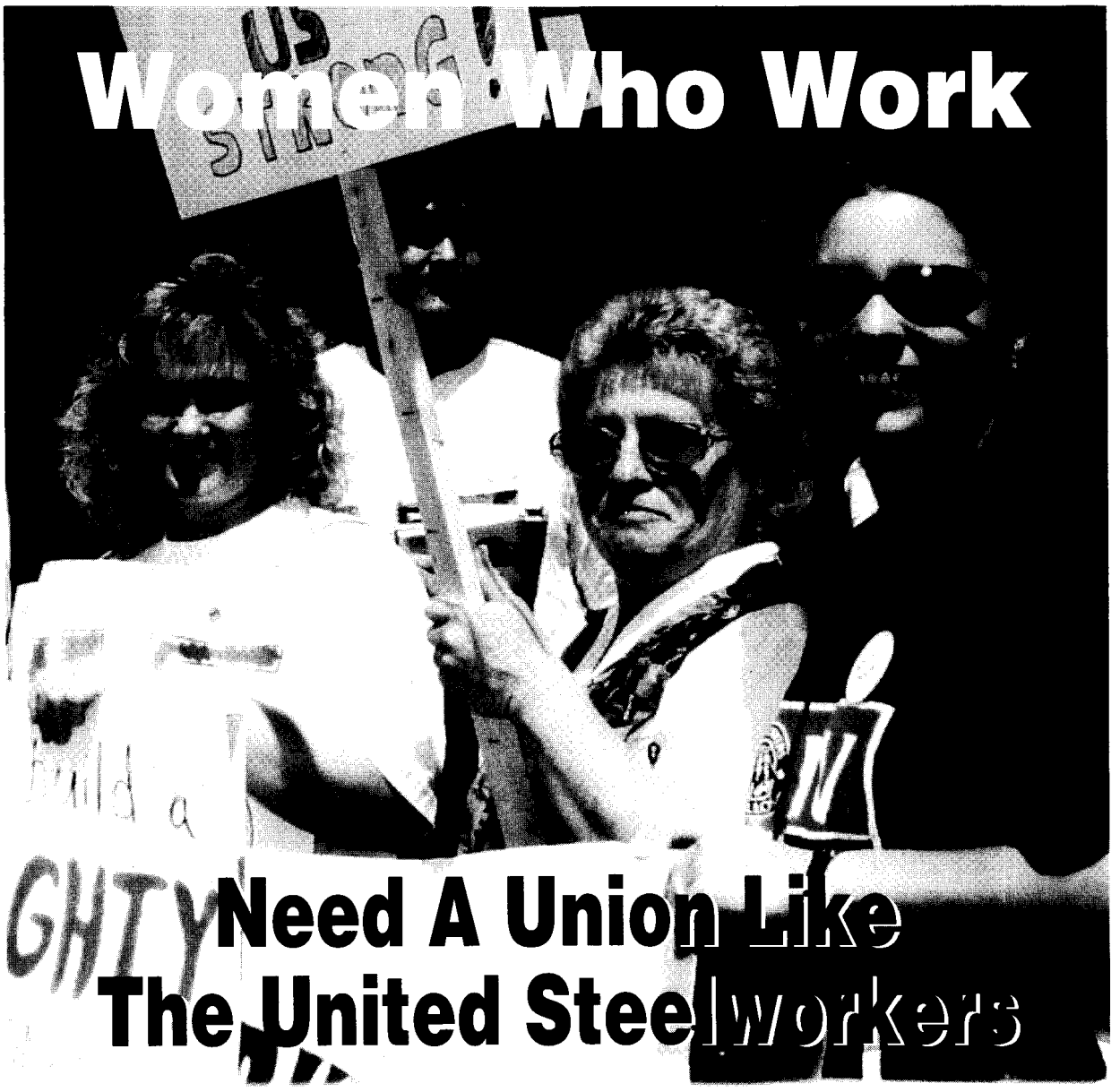

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STEELWORKERS METALLOS

Gendering Union Democracy

by Linda Briskin

Le fil conducteur qui lie les initiatives des femmes syndiquées devrait en être un de participation et d'inclusion plutôt que d'une simple représentation. Cet article examine une "démocratie qui réunit les sexes" comme un moyen d'éliminer les obstacles toujours présents et comme stratégie pour renforcer la capacité des syndicats à résister à la restructuration économique et politique.

Women and men have unequal access to political and economic power, and to union power. They do not experience democracy, or the lack thereof, in the same way. Democracy, then, is neither an abstraction nor gender-neutral.

Dramatic and disturbing patterns of economic and political restructuring are seriously undermining equality gains. Decreased funding to state services like health, education, and welfare programs, increased calls for labour flexibility and competitive wage bargaining across national boundaries, the creation of more non-standard, part-time, part-year service work, the shift to homework, off-shore production and contracting out, and the ideology of radical individualism all negatively impact on women and minority workers.

In such a context, women workers need unions more than ever. Unions provide a vehicle for struggling around fundamental issues affecting their home and work lives—economic independence, the right to secure employment, child care, and harassment- and violence-free environments. In the process, union activity fosters not only personal empowerment but political awareness and collective solidarity. Undoubtedly, unions also need women, most obviously to bolster declining union membership caused by the erosion in the largely male, industrial union base. Unions are looking to women workers for revitalization and growth, and to new sectors of the economy to replace their traditional support.[1]

In my view, organizing to change the unions, and to subvert the current right-wing political and economic agenda are intimately connected. I reject the argument that, in the current context, time spent transforming the unions is wasted and that all energies should be focussed on "external" realities.[2] Indeed, the capacity of the union movement to re-invent itself is critical to challenging successfully changes to work organization, defeating the neo-liberal agenda, and creating an alternative vision for the future.

Moreover, as increasing competition among workers is at the heart of restructuring, equity and solidarity—unity in diversity—must be central to union responses. This means taking up discriminatory practices based not only on class and gender but also on race, ethnicity, ability, age, and sexual orientation.

Organizing the multiple constituencies that make up the labour movement, many of which have been traditionally marginalized, will be central to the survival of the labour movement. In particular, the effectiveness of unions as sites of resistance for the twenty-first century depends on the successful re-visioning of union democracy.

For more than two decades, union women have been organizing to transform unions, successfully challenging their structures, policies, practices, and climate (Briskin 1983, 1993; White). A thread through all the initiatives of union women—on representation, leadership practices, separate organizing, redefining union issues, and collective bargaining—is the call for a substantively different form of democracy: for structures of participation and inclusivity rather than simply representation. Given women's history of exclusion from decision-making, this focus on democracy is not surprising. The democratizing vision is in stark contrast to the bureaucratic, hierarchical, overly competitive and often undemocratic practices of many unions, practices which have converged with male domination to exclude women and other marginalized groups.[3]

Women call for democratic practices that would allow them fuller access and more power in the workplace and union, and take account of their gender-specific realities. Women enter unions differently than men because of their workplace locations, their household/family responsibilities, and the pervasive violence they experience in both public and private spaces.[4] Women and men have unequal access to political and economic power, and to union power. They do not experience democracy, or the lack thereof, in the same way. Democracy, then, is neither an abstraction nor gender-neutral.

For these reasons I call for "gendering union democracy" which speaks to making the internal practices of unions more democratic and welcoming, and more accessible by taking account of realities such as child care and domestic responsibilities. It means ensuring that the bargaining agenda reflects the needs of women workers, and promoting organizational structures such as women's committees that encourage the participation of women. The language of "gendering democracy" is both useful in moving away from abstractions about democ-

racy, and problematic in that it is does not reflect the specific visions about, and claims for, democracy that emerge from other marginalized groups in the unions: lesbian and gay workers, workers of colour, workers with disabilities. So, for example, democratizing unions for workers with disabilities will involve, at minimum, increasing accessibility.

There is clearly an element of truth in arguments that increasing women's representation in elected leadership positions will increase union democracy (although there is always the danger of assuming that elected women will necessarily represent women's interests).

Inglis Plant, Toronto, 1989. *Photo: David Smiley*

> Female involvement at every level of union activity and decision-making will strengthen that trend within organized labor that historically has advocated greater rank-and-file participation, greater internal democracy, more collective and community-oriented practices, and more progressive stands on national and international issues.... The attitudes, style of work, scope of concerns and political preferences of today's female union activists—tomorrow's union leaders—will help rekindle a social unionism ... a social unionism that is needed today to inspire workers and galvanize a movement. (Needleman 2)

A study of public sector unions in Quebec suggests there might also be a reverse causal relationship: "An increase in the level of democracy practised in union internal government will foster greater election of women as presidents and officers of union locals" (Nichols-Heppner 270). Accepting both approaches is strategically useful: the former supports a call for increased representation of women, and other marginalized groups, and the latter for increased democracy in union process and structure.

Regardless, changes in representation are not sufficient to gender democracy. For representational strategies to be successful, they must be deeply embedded in larger processes of democratizing organizational practices, and union cultures and structures. In a study of women trade union leaders in the Society of Graphical and Allied Trades (SOGAT) in Britain, Ledwith, *et al.* draw a similar conclusion, criticizing the reliance on union constitutions as a vehicle for democracy:

> [C]onstitutions do not on their own cause democratic behaviour, or ... equality between women and men. Constitutions have to be realized through the social processes which are going on all the time.... To achieve equality, reforms have to touch social processes within trade union organizations, as well as the constitution. (124)

There is a strong connection between democratic, participatory processes within the labour movement and the militancy needed to face employer intransigence. For example, in her analysis of the roots of militancy of the United Nurses of Alberta (UNA), Rebecca Coulter isolates the highly democratic and participatory demand-setting process of collective bargaining within the UNA as the flashpoint for nurses' militancy and a key element in explaining both the solidarity of the membership and their willingness to strike:

> The UNA leadership recognizes that it is the open and democratic process of demand setting and reporting back which "inspires and motives the members...." [T]he members experience a strong sense of ownership with respect to bargaining demands because they have been actively involved at each stage. (51)

The trajectory toward democratization is supported by current moves by some Canadian unions toward a stronger endorsement of social unionism which sees unions as part of a social movement concerned with a wide range of social, political, and economic issues, and which supports participative structures. Social unionism contests business unionism's narrow focus on wages, benefits, and job security, and its emphasis on service and representation rather than participation. Demands by women activists for full participation challenge the apathy produced by the service mentality of business unionism, and shift the ground of union power structures.

Practices of union democracy have also been encouraged by the movement to Canadianize (gain autonomy

from American "parent" unions) some "international" unions, such as the United Auto Workers (UAW). The struggle for Canadian autonomy has created a unique space for discussion about and support for rank-and-file participation, for more democratic and inclusive structures, and separate/self/autonomous organizing for women and other marginalized groups. The split of the male-dominated Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) from the UAW, for example, has strengthened traditions of progressive organizing and collective bargaining around women's issues, making CAW an equity leader among private-sector industrial unions.

Parallel to the connection among Canadianization, autonomous organizing and democracy is the convergence of demands by rank-and-file unionists for more democracy, and by union women struggling for more voice. Gendering democracy is thus inherently linked to rank-and-file empowerment. Not surprisingly, then, resistance to these demands is evident from *both* patriarchal and bureaucratic interests. Some of the resistance to women's organizing inside unions, then, is resistance to the implicit rank-and-file challenge to entrenched leaderships. Dierdre Gallagher, a long-time feminist activist in the union movement makes this link: "[W]omen's push within the labour movement has represented a demand for a more democratic union. These people who fear democracy, fear women" (354).

In 1983, I made this argument and would reiterate it today:

> Women activists face two kinds of resistance in the union movement. One is resistance to us as women, a reflection of patriarchal norms and values implicit in every institution in capitalist society. We expect this kind of resistance. The other form of resistance is not a particular resistance to us as women. It is a resistance to our militancy: to our challenge to the leadership, to our demand that the union movement take up issues outside the narrow framework of business unionism and that it operate with more democratic and accountable structures. (Briskin 1983, 268)

Gendering democracy is a way of actualizing the principles of equality, solidarity, justice, and fairness which are such a deeply ingrained part of union ideology, if not its practice. Roberta Lynch comments on the American labour movement:

> Democracy has long been labor's hallmark. Labor unions were founded not just as the champion of working people, but as their voice, and unions remain among the most democratic institutions in American society.... Measured against virtually every other major institution in our society, they are singularly open, flexible, and responsive. When measured against their own promise, however, too many unions are falling short. (416)

The struggle to gender democracy in the unions is critical: for women, it will be the key to gaining and maintaining access to, and a voice within, the labour movement; it will empower women to stand firm when confronting their employers; and it will strengthen the union movement's capacity to resist economic and political restructuring.

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[1]In 1992, 38.2 per cent of men and 31.2 per cent of women workers were unionized for an overall rate of 34.9 per cent. Women made up 41 per cent of union membership and accounted for 79 per cent of the growth in union membership in Canada between 1983–1992. Compared to some European figures, these seem low; however, Canadian union density rates are much higher than in the United States. There, in 1990, unions represented only 21.4 per cent of men and 14.5 per cent of women, although the gender breakdown of union membership is comparable (Cobble). Percentage figures are deceptive, however, since they do not take account of the huge layoffs and cutbacks which have decreased absolute numbers in unions. For example, in 1992 male union membership declined by nearly 44,000. Labour-force participation rates help to situate the figures on union density: in 1994, 52 per cent of women over 15 years old and 65 per cent of men were in the labour force. Women constituted 45 per cent of the total labour force (Statistics Canada 1994, 1995).

[2]This is reminiscent of arguments in revolutionary situations that women's issues are secondary. However, the failure of many revolutions can be attributed, at least in part, to their failure to address women's concerns.

[3]Cuneo rightly cautions about the dangers of assuming that democracy is itself a sufficient antidote to patriarchy in the unions, and challenges the false binary of bureaucracy and democracy. "[B]ureaucracy is often seen as patriarchal, and democracy as feminist.... [But] patriarchy can also flourish under both bureaucracy and democracy. Needless to say, some democratic structures, especially in large unions, can be quite bureaucratic. This is particularly true for representational rather than direct democracy" (118). It is for such reasons that I push beyond representation in my argument for gendering democracy.

[4]Recognizing the realities of gender-specific experience and discrimination need not invoke biological essential-

ism. A non-essentialist approach begins from the position that women's experiences are socially constituted, and recognizes that such experiences are constituted differently for women of colour, immigrant women, poor women, women with disabilities, and lesbians.

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PATIENCE WHEATLEY

Some Houses

Some houses wrap themselves around you bodily, covering you like a nutshell as if nothing will ever crack you out. Ours was like that, its wooden walls so full of large windows in front and behind, they seemed to be only half there, and were friendly, showing all we were inside.

We saw from the top of our thirty foot cliff the yards where the city repaired benches and swings, and the gravel space where firemen played baseball through golden afternoons. From our attic windows, we looked across to Nun's Island, the bridges, and the white streak of the river.

A wooden house, a hundred years old, our house groaned and shook when the wind battered its south-west corner. The acacia tree in front, covered with dangling candle-wax flowers, sheltered us, kept the sun from shrivelling us up. Behind, the garden flourished in the tree's moving shade: roses, begonias, irises.

Our kitchen faced north (or north-west, if you remember Montreal is skewed and south is really south-east) with a window so low the dog, coming back from a tryst with the lady cop in the park, put her head right into the room, scoffed food off the table.

When we cracked eggs for Christmas puddings, every child on the street came in to stir, make a secret wish with closed eyes, lick a finger dipped in spicy batter. Those winters, snow reached up to the windows, sealed cracks in the stone foundation, was shoulder high along the front path.

One spring there came a change. The elm in the garden behind, only a little older than its owner at a hundred and fifty years, put out green leaves. But on one side only.

Patience Wheatley came to Canada at the age of 15 and spent most of her life in Montreal. From 1943 to 1946 she was in the Canadian Women's Army Corps. She has two published books of poetry: A Hinge of Spring *(Goose Lane Editions, 1986) and* Good-bye to the Sugar Refinery *(Goose Lane Edition, 1989).*