

Globalization and Its Twin Sisters Hit Canada Post

by Marion Pollack

Cet article discute de l'impact de la mondialisation de l'économie sur les Postes canadiennes et spécifiquement de ses effets sur les femmes qui y travaillent.

In many regions, the post office is an important source of stable income, especially for women. Closing these outlets, or transferring them to the private sector deprives women both of a source of employment and of community spirit.

In the past ten years, Canada Post has been undergoing massive changes due to the pressures of globalization and its twin sisters, privatization and contracting out. While the impact of globalization in the North is frequently discussed in the context of plant closures and the effects of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), it is also having a major impact in Canada's public sector. Private profit-making enterprises are gaining access to work historically carried out by so-called civil servants while public sector corporations are being restricted from expanding their services. Government offices are faced with contracting out and downsizing. In terms of wages and benefits paid to Canadian workers, there is increasing pressure for a "level playing field" which results in a decline in the incomes of Canadian workers. As well, there are huge pressures from transnational corporations and their corporate allies to weaken and destroy the social safety net.

While the impact of globalization is felt by all workers, women are adversely affected. The Canadian Labour Congress' report on "Women's Work" documents through stories, research, and statistics the impact of economic restructuring on women's work. It points to an increasing pattern of polarization where young women, disabled women, Aboriginal, and visible minority women are facing high unemployment rates, while a few women in managerial and professional groups are becoming upwardly mobile. The report further points out that full-time, full-year jobs have virtually disappeared for women. In 1996, the only jobs that grew for women were part-time. One in ten workers in Canada is now temporary. The report shows the difficulties women are facing as they juggle family life, work life, and the new responsibilities foisted upon them by the slashing of health care, education, and social services.

Canada Post is a microcosm of these changes. Since

1986, there has been a shift in Canada Post away from a public service towards a market-driven, private sector service. This is most notable in terms of Canada Post's retail counters. Before 1986 Canada Post Corporation (CPC) had corporate-owned retail counters in almost every city and town in Canada. Large urban centres were literally dotted with CPC retail outlets. Eleven years later, many small communities no longer have Canada Post-run retail counters. Instead, people are acquiring postal services in drugstores, 7-Eleven's, gas stations, and fish shops. The effect of this change has been threefold. Firstly, there has been a transfer of jobs from the unionized Canada Post outlet to poorly paid, mostly female, store clerks. Several notable features of the retail sector are low wages, as well as lack of union representation, and the growth in part-time and casual work has been more pronounced in the service/retail sector than anywhere else. Secondly, the shift to private postal outlets has had a devastating impact on smaller communities. Community post offices and postal stations have often been the heart of a community. They serve as a community meeting place—the hub of local activity. In many regions, the post office is also an important source of stable income, especially for women. Closing these outlets, or transferring them to the private sector deprives women both of a source of employment and of community spirit. Thirdly, the closure of CPC's retail postal outlets has meant that the profit generated by these outlets is now put in the hands of the private sector. Unfortunately, statistics show that this income is not creating jobs for women, but is merely topping the profit margins of corporations. It also means that Canada Post has less and less money to develop or improve its existing services.

Temporary employees represented by the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) comprise over 33 per cent of workers at Canada Post. This trend has been increasing rapidly. In the decade between 1985–1995 full-time mail sortation positions have declined by 33.5 per cent while at the same time the usage of temporary and casual mail sorters grew by 275.4 per cent (CUPW). In 1985 temporary and casual hours represented 1.9 per cent of the total internal processing and sortation hours paid. In 1995 temporary and casual hours represented 9.9 per cent of all hours paid (CUPW). CUPW estimates that over 1,500 full-time, full-year sortation jobs can be created by turning temporary, overtime, and extended part-time hours into permanent positions. Statistics show that the jobs are there. The only thing that is not there is the willingness to create full-time, full-year jobs. Unfortunately, a huge percentage of casual and temporary workers are women (CUPW).

Globalization means that governments are not prepared to expand their services. They prefer the private sector to take on tasks that were performed or should be performed by the public sector. For instance, many urban Canadians currently are not serviced by door-to-door mail delivery and are forced to use community mail boxes. This creates hardship for the elderly and disabled and is a irritant to many others. CUPW has been long arguing that Canada Post expand its door-to-door delivery services. This position has been endorsed by several government reports (Radwanski). But, instead of taking this on, Canada Post is turning a blind eye and allowing the private sector to take this task on. This results in a loss of decent paying jobs for women.

The effect of these changes is that women's opportunities for decent full-time, full-year employment are sharply curtailed. Rather than having access to secure employment, with adequate wages and benefits, working women are going to increasingly find themselves in the contingent workforce. Poorly paid part-time and temporary jobs not only have an impact on the economic well-being of a woman, but they also adversely affect her chance to obtain decent housing, personal and social independence, and self-esteem. In addition, the decline in decent employment standards for women in the public sector, coupled with the rapid growth of part-time and temporary labour, puts a downward pressure on the wages and benefits of all working women.

Globalization has two ugly twin sisters—privatization and contracting out. Any serious attempt to take on globalization on a worldwide basis should also involve challenging privatization, contracting out, and the growth of the contingent labour force in our communities.

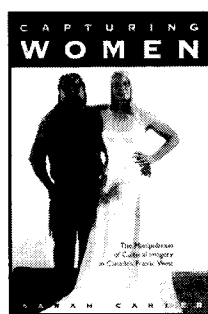
Marion Pollack is a postal worker and an activist in the Vancouver local of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers. She has the opportunity to think about globalization while spending eight hours per day sorting mail.

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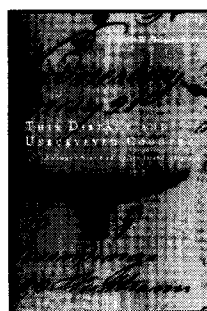
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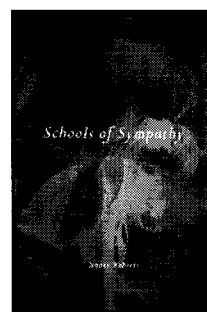
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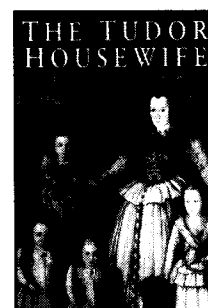
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