

# Fighting for Dignity on the Plant Floor

## An Interview with Helen Aitcheson

by Jonathan Eaton

*Cet article présente une partie d'une entrevue avec Helen Aitcheson, présidente du Syndicat du vêtement, textile et autres industries (SVTI) qui aborde les changements dans le marché de l'exportation des produits textiles à Toronto.*



Helen Aitcheson, President, UNITE, Local 836, May 1997.  
Photo: Jonathan Eaton

Helen Aitcheson is president of Local 836 of the Union of Needletrades, Industrial, and Textile Employees (UNITE). She represents over 300 women and men working at Coats Patons, Canada's largest producer of hand knitting yarns. This Toronto firm is one of the oldest manufacturers in Canada. Like all manufacturing workers, members of Local 836 face an increasingly tough economic environment. In the wake of free trade and globalization, the Canadian textile industry has come under immense pressure from cheap imports. Over 160 countries around the world export textile products into the markets of about 30 industrialized nations. So far, Coats Patons has managed to survive in this hyper-competitive environment, and it

now ships over 40 per cent of its product to the United States. As local president for the last 12 years, Helen has fought to improve wages and benefits for workers and to maintain dignity and respect on the plant floor. Her members, mostly women, came to Canada from all parts of the world.

Helen was born in England and grew up in Jamaica. She moved to Canada as a teenager, and started working in the textile industry when she was 18 years old. She has one daughter, age 27.

Recently Helen met with union researcher Jonathan Eaton to share her reflections on work, the union, and the struggle of working women for equality. Highlights from this interview are reproduced below.

### Starting work

I've worked at Coats Patons for 24 years. What do I do? [laughing] Aside from the union work, I'm a machine operator. I started out as a pieceworker. We're not on piecework anymore. I'm a machine operator in the finishing department, winding. What we do is we take the skeins<sup>1</sup> and put them on the machines and it turns it into a cone. And from that process it goes [to be packaged] and is shipped out.

Actually it was the first job I ever had. I've been there 24 years now, so I started there at 18. I had just finished school. When I went there they didn't want to hire me, because I had no experience, fresh out of school. They felt that the [production] job didn't suit me. But as a child growing up, I never wanted to be in an office job with a collar and tie and whatnot. I always liked working with people and helping people. I found it to be the perfect job. I started on the midnight shift. Then I went to a jobber, which I didn't like. Then I got a machine operator's job.

### Talking union

The union was there, but they weren't very active. I got voted in as shop steward because I was so vocal. At that time we only had two shop stewards. We used to go to meetings. I used to argue issues. And I got very depressed about the union and I didn't want to have anything to do with them after awhile. It was so hard to make progress.

And then the company fired me. They fired me and when we met with management, they said they're not firing me because of what's on the paper, but they're firing me as an instigator. What they didn't know was, I had a tape machine, and I taped that. I stayed home for about six, eight weeks. They didn't call me back. And I pushed forward, I said I'm going to take it to arbitration. They

said, well you have no evidence as to what was said in the meeting. So I made another copy of the tape and I sent it to the personnel manager. They called me the next day and gave me back my job with full seniority.

At that time I decided to really get involved with the union, and I was voted in as president. And from there on I've been really active. I've been president 12 years now.

### Facing challenges

[The hardest thing] is satisfying everybody's needs. Trying to get everybody involved in the union, in the labour movement on the whole. I have a wonderful executive, beautiful. I have 17 shop stewards. They've all been to courses offered by the union. I do try my best to promote the union, because I'm a dedicated trade unionist—maybe too much so! Some people are very supportive of the union, but others aren't, and you'll find that wherever you go.

My biggest problem, not so much with the members—even with some of the members, but mostly management—is that some of them feel that, “Oh, you're a woman in that position, you shouldn't have that amount of authority.” And those are the ones I focus on, and say well, I am here, you're going to have to deal with me. They

don't like that. But when you call them on discrimination they shut up.

The members feel great [about having a woman president] because our plant is mostly female. The guys feel pretty good too, I think. They don't feel bad that there is a woman in charge. The members are fine with that. They just want somebody there who will fight for them, and bring their issues forward.

Things have changed now. We've got a totally different management team. They're more open. I have no problems with them now. All the bad weeds are gone, aside from a few, but they don't hassle me. I think I'm more a threat to them than anything else now, because when I go on the floor they want to know: “what's wrong?” And everybody is there scurrying around. Which is good. They keep on their toes. And we have a president who has an “open-door” policy. I can go in and see him at any time. He's willing to sit down and talk with me.

### Hard fought gains

Getting rid of piecework<sup>2</sup> has been our biggest accomplishment. Working under piecework was a nightmare, a living nightmare. There's so many tricks we used to have to do in order to make our money.

I remember when I first started on piecework. Of course I was very young and vocal at that time. And I used to wonder, how come nobody knows how much per hour they are making? Most of the people were older Italian women. And they didn't know how much per hour they were making. And what management used to do, after we had finished our day's work, if we had actually earned \$13 an hour, the supervisor would chop it off, and we'd receive less. And I happened to find this out.

We used to use the washroom as a meeting place in the finishing department. And I got all the ladies to come in there. I told them to buy calculators. And I worked out a system to keep track of their work, and I gave each one of them a copy. I said this is how you calculate your work. And keep a copy of your work paper, always have a copy. At the end of the week you know how much you're supposed to get. If it's not there, we'll file a grievance. So we did that, and it was a big headache [for management]. Because we had proof that this was the amount of work that was put in, so why isn't this person getting paid?

Management didn't know how we did it.



Member of UNITE Local 836 at Coats Paton in Toronto, May 1997. Photo: Jonathan Eaton

They were questioning people, but nobody spoke. Nobody. We were so much together at that time. We all stuck together, through it. Eventually we looked at piecework and decided to try and take it out of the collective agreement. We're all hourly paid now. People are less stressed-out now, they feel better. The pay for most of the people, because of the overtime they put in, has actually gone up. That was the biggest, biggest victory we ever had in Coats Patons' history.

### **The next generation**

This generation that is being hired by the company is a younger set. I make it a point to go and introduce myself. Let them know where I can be found if they have a problem, who their shop steward is. And they feel good about it. Some of them will be threatened by management. People tell them "Don't go to Helen." I try and get rid of that fear with them. And some of them are quite militant. They're militant because some of the shop stewards that are there let them know, "listen there's a union here. If you have a problem don't listen to management, we'll go to Helen and she'll represent you."

### **Challenging harassment**

People are definitely more prepared to challenge harassment now. They are more equipped because they know there's a union here. They know there are laws to protect them and they are very much aware of that. And it's now coming to the surface. So you don't find there is too much harassment. Of course you're going to have supervisors who do do it. You can't get out of that. But they're very few. Very, very few. And when we get a hold of it we deal with it.

### **Women in the labour movement**

At the big labour bodies, such as the OFL and the CLC<sup>3</sup> it's harder to be heard as a woman. I've heard it myself... when people are talking about sexual harassment and minority issues, and women in the workplace, the [leadership] don't seem to really listen or participate too much. And that's a shame because we're all working people and we're all supposed to support one another. It has improved but we still have a long way to go. It has improved overall.

### **Goals for the future**

Our main goals now must be unity and solidarity. Because if we have unity we can overcome any obstacle. I would like to see more involvement at the top level [of the union] with the membership.... When you know that the leadership is behind you, and your membership is behind you, it builds up your strength. Emotionally, it really makes a difference.

<sup>1</sup>A "skein" is a continuous strand of yarn or cord in the form of a collapsed coil.

<sup>2</sup>"Piecework" is an incentive pay system, whereby workers receive a variable amount of pay depending on their individual output.

<sup>3</sup>UNITE Local 836 is affiliated with both the Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) and the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC).

*Jonathan Eaton is assistant to the Canadian director of UNITE, and a frequent contributor to progressive and labour journals.*

## **JOAN BOND**

### **Cottage Country**

The door opens, she searches  
my face as through fog,  
nonetheless, invites me  
into her room of mismatched chairs and memo-  
ries.

Repeating news of her husband's death  
just three days ago (in reality, twenty years),  
she locks my hands like a vice,  
"Why didn't he tell me about his heart!"

Her eyes narrow, she investigates  
(as if divining my bra and shoe sizes)  
how I know the people across the back lane,  
then squeals when I recite the names of neigh-  
bours.

Our lips soft, we fumble over which holiday  
the whole street gathered for hot dogs  
and Mr. Zencowski's fireworks, every face  
upturned  
toward celestial illusion.

She takes me for a saleslady of magazines  
(more on her floor than I could read in a year)  
shouting, "No thank you dear, I have my favour-  
ites."

Like a dervish, my mind twirls out of the  
present  
into the past, my voice an octave lower,  
"Magazines are so nice at the cottage."

Another squeal  
(arms fluttering like fledgling wings),  
she parades the status of hoi polloi  
who visited their guest cabins,  
who swam in their lake,  
her eyes as bright  
as the child she is.

*Joan Bond's poetry appears earlier in this volume.*