

# Women of Steel

## A Case of Feminist Organizing in the United Steelworkers of America

by Mary Margaret Fonow

*L'auteure explore les façons dont les femmes activistes à l'intérieur du Syndicat des métallos ont construit et utilisé une idéologie féministe pour encadrer leur participation syndicale et donner une nouvelle signification à la solidarité.*

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Advances in technology, economic restructuring, and the rapid globalization of the economy have created difficult challenges for organized labour and for the women's movement and new and sobering realities for women workers around the world. Although painted as a universal imperative, economic restructuring and adjustment policies have a differential impact on countries, regions, and economic sectors as well as on different groups of workers whose gender, race, nationality, education, etc. have structured their location in the labour market in different ways (Bakker). For example, the flight of capital encouraged by free trade agreements has resulted in the loss of jobs in manufacturing and textiles for women in Canada and in the U.S. and an increase in the exploitation of girls and young women in the Maquiladoras of Mexico.

The scope and magnitude of the problems associated with economic restructuring require an integrated global response. Unions with their international networks can play an important role in the struggle for decent wages and working conditions, clean environments, and public services. The work of feminists within the ranks of organized labour will be particularly important if labour is to understand the gendered implications of economic restructuring and to fashion a response that takes into account the needs and concerns of working women.

My research on women's activism in the United Steelworkers of America (USWA) in the U.S. and Canada allows me to examine the ways a specific group of working-class women construct and deploy feminism as a tool for social, political, and economic change and the potential of such a feminism for helping the union respond to the problems working women face in the global economy. How does a "stable," traditionally male-dominated labour organization with a transnational constituency become a crucible of feminist activism and organizing, and in turn, how does

such a feminism, forged in a particular institutional niche, function to transform union culture and labour activism? How do feminist activists harness the union's considerable resources, structure, and formal channels of communication to organize on the behalf of feminist issues and goals? What are the outcomes and implications of women's union activism and feminism for dealing with the current economic transformations? How do women activists use the union's international networks to forge alliances across national boundaries? I base my analysis of these questions on interviews with union staff and officials, on observations of union events, on interviews with women activists, and on an analysis of union documents.

### Women and the United Steelworkers of America

The United Steelworkers of America represents over 700,000 workers in the U.S., Canada, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands. Women are 20 per cent of the Canadian membership and about 12 per cent of the U.S. membership. While manufacturing is still a stronghold for the union, inroads have been made in service occupations such as retail, grocery stores, health care, finance, insurance, and real estate. In fact, the Retail Wholesale and Department Store Union in Canada merged with the Steelworkers in 1995 bringing 25,000 new members to the union, primarily women. The union's continued success in attracting new members depends on its ability to design approaches and programs relevant to women workers in the service sector. Aware that their long-term success depends on organizing and representing new types of workers and workplaces in the U.S. and Canada, the union has adopted a new slogan, "Everybody's Union." Their new logo features men and women of various races and nationalities engaged in a wide range of occupations. Videos, posters, bumper stickers, newsletters, and t-shirts all proclaim the theme of solidarity through diversity.

A very important development in organizing women is the maturation of female leadership that has occurred in the USWA since the mid-'70s. With 20 years or more of experience in a male-dominated union, these women understand the union culture, the political milieu, and the organizational apparatus of the USWA. They are being joined by new, more recently organized female membership drawn from occupations not traditionally under the jurisdiction of the USWA. Union feminists have helped to create new programs within the union to increase the participation of women and to give greater visibility to issues of concern to working women. Unified under the rubric of Women of Steel, these initiatives involve a range of activities, projects, and organizational forms including

conference resolutions; newsletters; women's conferences; the establishment and revitalization of women's committees at the local, district, national, and international levels; and the creation of a new educational and leadership development program specifically for women.

### **Can it be called feminist organizing?**

I view the Women of Steel campaign as a form of feminist organizing constituted by the ongoing and shifting forms of interactions between various groups of participants within the union's organizational environment.

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Martin suggests that such efforts can be labelled feminist—whether the actors label it as such or not—if it was founded as part of the women's movement or if it has any of the following: feminist ideology, feminist values, feminist goals, or feminist outcomes. I will show that the Women of Steel campaign matches many of the attributes identified by Martin as characteristic of feminist organizations.

Feminist ideology according to Martin views women as a disadvantaged group and believes social, political, and economic change are necessary in order to eliminate the social arrangements that sustain women's disadvantaged position. The ideology of the Women of Steel campaign as expressed in mission statements, conference resolutions, policy reports, educational curriculum, handbooks, and collective bargaining agreements is explicitly feminist by these standards. Women of Steel documents emphasize the desirability of change in women's subjective consciousness and material conditions by constructing a discourse that blends trade union principles and rhetoric with feminist ones. Equality is articulated in terms of collective rights that extend beyond the traditional trade union concerns with economic rights to include social and political rights. Solidarity is not necessarily threatened by the acknowledgment of inequality and power differences among members based on gender, race, culture, disability, sexual orientation, etc. Rooted as they are in different webs of social relations, women can simultaneously belong to any number of meaningful "political" categories within the union. Attention to the specificity of women's interests does not necessarily undermine the class interest of the membership as a whole. According to the mission statement of the District 3 women's committee, "we are committed to gaining equality at home, work, within the Union and in the commu-

nity, while continuing to build on solidarity." The Women of Steel resolution introduced at the 1992 Constitutional Convention of the USWA further reflects the theme of equality, difference, and solidarity. "Gender equality is a union issue—it is a source of our strength and solidarity."

Sexual and racial harassment are viewed as a breach in solidarity and as a violation of basic human rights. The union's harassment policy states,

There are two principles fundamental to the union movement: human rights and solidarity. Harassment strikes at the heart of both. As trade unionists we must work to protect rights, not take them away. (USWA Harassment Policy)

The union's campaign against domestic violence, called Putting It on the Table, develops an analysis of gender, violence, and power that acknowledges the need to take into account other forms of disadvantage such as class, disability, race, and sexual orientation.

Our society, based on unequal wealth, status, opportunity, and power is a breeding ground for abusive behavior. Because of their lack of economic and political power, women are especially vulnerable to acts of violence. Doubly disadvantaged women—women with disabilities, lesbians, Aboriginal and visible minority women are doubly vulnerable to acts of violence.

In Canada, the union provides training for sexual and racial harassment counsellors in the workplace and offers collective bargaining language to help locals address this type of violence. Steelworkers have also begun to organize workers in shelters for battered women and counselling centres, an activity which will bring a new dimension to their violence-prevention work.

In terms of feminist goals, the Women of Steel campaign seeks to change the participants, the union, and the society through a variety of activities, programs, and organizational structures. Women's committees in the union were originally founded in the U.S. during the second wave of the women's movement (1970s) and re-emerged in the late 1980s in Canada with the goal of educating women about their rights on the job, men about their concerns, the community about the union. Similarly, the Women of Steel course developed in Canada in 1990 and adapted for use in the U.S. seeks to raise the consciousness of women and empower them to mobilize the union to support issues of concern to women. These concerns include sexual and racial harassment, domestic violence, balancing work and family, pay equity, and domestic partner benefits. The externally directed activities of the women's committees included mobilization of union members to participate in national campaigns such as the National Day of Remembrance and Action on

Violence Against Women and the American Federation of Labour/Congress of Industrial Organization's (AFL-CIO) recent women's conference in Washington, D.C., to become active in area labour councils and to network with other feminists in the federated labour bodies.

Feminist values which emphasize mutual support, personal growth, and empowerment are also reflected in the Women of Steel campaign. The women's committees function as quasi-support groups providing "a safe environment for women to discuss current workplace, community or personal issues, strategies for change, and mentoring, to young and newly organized women" (Cana-

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dian National Women's Committee, USWA, Section 1, 5). The purpose of the Women of Steel course is to develop leadership, broadly defined, among women in the USWA and to empower women to confront various forms of discrimination in their workplace, their union, and their community. It focuses on effective communication skills, leadership styles and qualities, and critical analysis of situations and obstacles women face. Topics include institutional barriers affecting women's advancement, sexual and racial harassment, history of women in the union, stress, forming women's committees, conflict management, and public speaking. The curriculum aims to demystify the power structure and union politics by having seasoned union activists discuss how the union really works. The course also attempts to forge links between participants and other groups, organizations, or agencies concerned with gender equity and to build solidarity across various lines of difference among women. One African American woman testified to the consciousness-raising and empowerment effects of the course:

*I guarantee you—no matter who you are, how much education, how you think you know yourself once you go through the Women of Steel course, you're a different person when you come out. It's like this. If we go to a union meeting [and] every time we go we know that we're supposed to sit in the back and keep our mouths shut, we don't open our mouths. We don't speak out against men. Then boom! You can't sit at the back of the room anymore. You want to sit in the first table, in their seats.*

The curriculum emphasizes building solidarity through recognizing difference and diversity and does not flinch from difficult topics like racism. One of the course instructors told me,

*We've had courses where there's women that have come from hospitals, come from the shop floor, come from offices, bus drivers. And they get together and they find they have so much in common. No matter what their job, no matter what their nationality, what their race, religion ... they talk about racial harassment, racial discrimination, racial diversity, and sexual harassment. And everybody was able to talk so openly in the group.*

While feminist organizing takes place within the formal bureaucratic structure of the union, the Women of Steel campaign manifests a variety of structures. At the most formal end of the continuum are the women's committees. Typically these committees display a collectivist form of decision-making, rotating the division of labour. Men can and do participate in activities and serve on subcommittees. The Women of Steel leadership course is restricted to women. The rationale for creating separate forms of organizing is predicated on women's minority status in a male-dominated union and their experiences of sexual harassment and sex discrimination on the job. According to the reference guide for women's committees,

In many workplaces: mines, factories, and offices, women are in a minority. The work environment—from the physical layout of the office or plant, to the behavior of management and the traditional "shop talk"—creates barriers to women's employment and training. In the retail and service sectors, where work is traditionally undervalued and underpaid and hours of work vary tremendously, women struggle to organize and fight for job security and decent wages. In every sector across Canada, women continue to face workplace harassment and discrimination. (Canadian National Women's Committee, USWA, Sec. 1, 1)

Separate programs, activities and organizing is viewed as a strategic form of mobilization to enhance women's participation in the union and to raise their consciousness as agents of social change in the broader society. The goal of the campaign is the full integration of women in the union, and an end to discrimination in the workplace and in society, not separatism. The reliance on separate forms of mobilization and organizing is a reflection of gender significance and specificity already built into social arrangements at work, in the union and within the broader society (Briskin). Power differences among union women may at times require separate forms of mobilization for women of colour, women with disabilities, lesbians, and Aboriginal women. In fact, there is a special Women of Steel course for women of colour in Canada. One woman from Ontario who participated in the special course believed that women of colour needed separate space to talk about culturally sensitive topics like abuse.

*If you have a woman of colour experiencing abuse, we*

*would not talk about it. I find the average Canadian is willing to talk about it, they are more open, they are more willing to tell you openly about the things they experience in their families. We tend to keep that to ourselves and figure, well, already we are not that lucky (because of racism and discrimination) so let's keep that to ourselves.*

It is too early to assess fully the feminist outcomes of the Women of Steel campaign. Only about 300 women have taken the leadership course in Canada and even fewer in the U.S. Women's committees, while somewhat better organized in Canada, are not spread evenly throughout

Union feminists are able to use the fact that gays and lesbians are protected from discrimination under the Canadian Human Rights Code to lobby for more inclusive policies and contracts.

The Canadian Steelworkers held their National Women's Conference in December 1996. Three hundred and seventy women, double the expected number, attended to discuss a broad range of issues including occupational health and safety, balancing work and family, and building women's committees in the locals. Long-time labour activist and feminist Nancy Riche, vice-president of the Canadian Labour Congress, and Joan Grant-Cummings,



*United Steelworkers First National Women's Conference, December 1996*

the union's geographic area of representation in either country. The committees are strongest in District 6 in Ontario and in District 7 in the U.S.—a district with a sizable membership of black women. The course is available in French and English.

Although there are no real numbers to show how many collective bargaining agreements contain the issues identified by the Women of Steel campaign, there are some signs of feminist outcomes. The union's collective bargaining guidebook helps locals negotiate a range of gender equity and work/family benefits. It contains model contract language for negotiating family leave, child care, sexual harassment protection, pay equity, and benefits for same-sex partners. For example, the following contract language from an actual agreement is provided as a model on same-sex benefits.

It is agreed that an Employee with a same-sex partner shall be treated the same as a married Employee or an Employee with a common-law partner with respect to entitlement under the Collective Agreement for benefits for dependents or family members arising out of, but not limited to, Article 45 and 46 Health and Insurance Benefits. (Canadian National Women's Committee, USWA, Section 4, 6).

the president of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women, gave rousing speeches about the power of feminism and unions to address the pressing concerns of working-class and poor women in a global economy. At one of the conference's speak-outs, a young Canadian feminist brought down the house when she told of her efforts to organize employees at a Wal-Mart store where she worked in Windsor. Thanks to Canadian labour law, the campaign was eventually successful. The courts ruled that the company had engaged in unfair labour practices, intimidating workers by implying the store would close if they voted for a union. A new vote resulted in certification (Klein). Efforts to organize workers at a Wisconsin Wal-Mart store were unsuccessful (Dedman).

Finally, union feminists are beginning to address the problems created by the pressures of the global economy through its work with the Steelworkers Humanity Fund, a project that supports the work of 31 labour organizations and development projects in the "Third World." In 1993 the Humanity Fund asked the District 6 Women's Committee to help develop a statement on gender to guide the future work of the Fund. It states,

Development activities have historically affected women differently than men. This reflects the greater

poverty and dependence women experience in most parts of the world and the inequality of women relative to men in their political, economic, and social power. (USWA, Steelworkers' Humanity Fund)

The Humanity Fund sponsors exchanges between Canadian workers and workers in Mexico, Bolivia, Peru, and Guatemala and is concentrating on Free Trade issues. At the National Women's Conference women delegates from four countries in Latin America addressed the Canadians about the importance of building global solidarity for economic justice.

### Conclusion

Activists use institutionally sanctioned space such as conventions and conferences to develop discursive tools such as Women of Steel conference resolutions, sexual harassment policies, and educational programs to advance the interests of women and to mobilize their participation in the union. According to Katzenstein and Mansbridge, it is in such spaces that women shape their ideas about feminism, affirm their identities as activists and rewrite, through language and symbolic acts, their understanding of themselves as political actors committed to changing the institutional and cultural practices that affect women. Women activists, brought together from vast geographical areas at union expense, are able to network among themselves and use formal channels for the purpose of feminist organizing. For example, activists use the union's normal process for introducing convention resolutions to fashion support for more permanent forms of participation such as the Women of Steel course and women's committees. Because resolutions are circulated and endorsed by the locals they are used by the activists as consciousness-raising tools and as measures of grassroots support. The larger the number of endorsements obtained before the convention, the greater the impact the proposal makes on the convention floor. Seconding the adoption of Women of Steel resolutions from the floor also gives activists access to the microphones and another opportunity to mobilize support for their issues. Most of the major Women of Steel initiatives were initially adopted through this process, and activists are already considering the introduction of a resolution at the next International Convention to establish a Women's Department.

The union's transnational structure allows union feminists in the U.S. to use Canada's more favourable political climate for feminists and for labour where the rates of unionization are much higher. For example, the original research and pilot for the Women of Steel course was funded by a grant from Ontario's Women's Directorate, a governmental agency. The Ontario pay-equity legislation spurred the union to develop pay-equity expertise and to participate in the development of a pay-equity and job evaluation system. The union now has a vested interest in the present campaign to prevent the Ontario government

from rescinding the act. The women's movement in Canada has had a different relationship to labour and to the state than the movement in the U.S. According to Luxton feminist politics over the past 30 years have become institutionalized in the labour movement. The exchange of ideas, participants, resources, and leaders between the women's movement and the labour movement has resulted in a more class-oriented feminism and in greater support for feminist ideas and policies in the general population. Furthermore, because of geographic spread, cultural and linguistic diversity, and a federated state structure, political action in Canada is more dispersed. Citing Maroney, Luxton goes on to state,

Both strategically and organizationally, feminism in Canada has tended toward a politics of solidarity based on coalitions that recognize different constituencies. That dynamic created a space and legitimacy for union-based working-class feminism. (5)

The coalitional nature of the women's movement in Canada makes it a more hospitable site for a multicultural union feminism. Unlike the National Organization for Women in the U.S., which seeks to mobilize a large heterogeneous population into one large organization, the National Action Committee on the Status of Women seeks to coordinate and facilitate the work of over 500 different women's organizations. It brings to bear on Canadian politics decades of experience in building support for feminist issues from a very diverse constituency. The Canadian women's movement, with its strong ties to the labour movement and to the political parties, particularly the NDP, is situated to show labour that the recognition of diversity does not need to undermine worker solidarity. In fact, the Steelworkers will offer a new course, *Solidarity through Diversity*, as part of a five-million dollar education initiative aimed at developing a new generation of leadership.

In a time when the gains of organized labour are threatened in both countries, union feminists can offer guidance on the revitalization of the labour movement. This is especially true because women and visible minority men are the fastest-growing sector of the labour market, and both groups hold more favorable attitudes toward unions and are more likely to vote for unions than white men. Women are particularly supportive when organizing campaigns employ women organizers and pay attention to gender equity issues (Crain). If unions are to grow they must be able to appeal to a broad cross-section of the working class. The Women of Steel campaign has constructed a feminism that does not trade social politics for identity politics. They have forged what Fraser would call a political imaginary that can accommodate political claims based on the recognition of difference—the justice of recognition—with political claims based on the redistribution of wealth—the justice of redistribution. Union feminists in the United Steelworkers of America are

uniquely situated at the borders of social change. It is my hope, as Miles holds, that a more integrative feminist practice that affirms women's equality and differences will provide the foundation for building progressive movements capable of facing the excesses of the global economy.

*Mary Margaret Fonow is assistant professor of Women's Studies at the Ohio State University. She is currently working on a book about women's participation in the United Steelworkers of America in Canada and the U.S. Her research interests include labour feminism, feminist pedagogy, and qualitative methods. She is the co-editor Beyond Methodology: Feminist Scholarship as Lived Research and editor of an extensive new customized publishing database in Women's Studies from Simon and Schuster. Her analysis of women's participation in the 1985 strike at Wheeling-Pittsburgh Steel will be published in the forthcoming special issues of Gender and Society on gender and social movements.*

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## CHRIS WIND

crease, flip, crease, flip, crease, flip  
i fold the kleenex into an accordion  
then tie it with a tiny piece of string  
(it's important to tie it right in the middle—  
i have the strings all ready—  
three hundred two-inch pieces—)  
then i separate  
(don't pull it!)  
ply by ply  
(it must be done carefully—  
the layers are so thin—  
they tear easily—)

IT'S BORING  
AND TEDIOUS  
AND STUPID

i pretend to fluff it up  
as if it's something important, something artistic  
then i lay it into the large flat box

WE HAVE BEEN AT THIS FOR THREE NIGHTS  
my mother and i  
my sister's getting married

and my brother's upstairs  
allowed to do his homework  
instead

i feel again those tears  
of frustration and injustice

and reach for another kleenex

*chris wind has independently published several collections of poetry and prose.*