“We Can Do It Ourselves”

Worker-Led Organizing and the Feminist Movement on the West Coast

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A Thesis

In

The Department of History

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy (History)

Montréal, Québec

November 2025

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Concordia University

School of Graduate Studies

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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY (History)

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Abstract

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In the 1970s, segments of the women's movement turned to union organizing to improve working conditions and challenge patriarchal control over the workplace. Many workplaces, primarily staffed by women, were either ignored or dismissed by male-led organized labour. Into this void stepped activists with roots in the fights for abortion rights and against the Vietnam War. These feminist-inspired unions organized highly democratic organizations which sought to closely mirror the consciousness-raising groups which characterized the women's liberation movement. Workers in university offices, legal service non-profits, daycares, restaurants, and beyond joined feminist unions. These "pink-collar" workers won impressive gains for themselves and for other working women, including the first collective bargaining agreements in Canadian history which guaranteed fully paid maternity leave for clerical and support staff at the University of British Columbia and Simon Fraser University. This movement organized across national boundaries, with its strongest elements found in the metropolitan regions of North America's West Coast.

The feminist union movement faced hostility from several different groups, including management, government officials, and the mainstream labour movement. In Canada, the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) stymied the organizing of SORWUC and its successful bank worker organizing drive. Clashes with management, an increasingly unfriendly labour relations system, and opposition from male-led organized labour led to the movement's dissipation in the early 1980s. This thesis argues that through egalitarian structures, a willingness to challenge the prevailing notion of who belonged in the labour movement, and deep ties to existing social movements, feminist unions on the West Coast left a lasting impact on organized labour. By challenging organized labor and the mainstream women's movement, these organizations pushed both to pay closer attention to the needs of low wage working women and other marginalized groups.

This dissertation is an intervention into the history of social movements in twentieth century North America, particularly Canadian and United States labour history; the working class did not die in the 1970s but was transformed by the class and gender struggles of marginalized workers. By taking a transnational lens, it challenges prevailing nationalist frameworks.

Acknowledgements

I began my PhD program in September 2019 and the early portion of planning this thesis was done during the peak years of the COVID-19 pandemic. During these dark and often lonely pandemic days, I was able to stay home while others laboured to keep society operating. I want to thank the essential workers who directly and indirectly assisted with this project despite great risks to themselves and their families. This thesis is shaped, in part, by my own experiences as an organizer with a variety of organizations of the past two decades. I am deeply appreciative of many academic workers I organized alongside during my time as a member of the Teaching and Research Assistants at Concordia (TRAC) and its successor, the Concordia Research and Education Workers (CREW). During the winter 2025 semester, my comrades and I in CREW endured freezing cold weather for more than a week while on strike. I am deeply appreciative of the support and comradeship gained through my involvement with the Montreal Autonomous Tenants Union (SLAM-MATU). I learned so much from these experiences and I hope that this dissertation brings to light some of the unique issues faced by academic workers.

I was honoured to receive financial assistance and awards from a variety of institutions over the course of this project, including the Canadian Committee on Labour History, the Eric Swanick Special Collections at Simon Fraser University, the Walter P. Reuther Library at Wayne State University, the Concordia University Social Justice Centre, and the St. Andrew's Society of Montreal. Two digital archives played a key role in this project. CUPE 2950 at the University of British Columbia sponsored a project which digitized 21,000 pages of AUCE records and made them open to the public. Having access to these crucial records made this thesis easier and more thorough than would have otherwise been possible. Similarly, *Rise Up! a digital archive of feminist activism in Canada* and their decades-old efforts, were immensely helpful to me. I am thankful for the support of Concordia's Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling. Several unions and labour institutions assisted me with accessing interviewees or institutional archives, including the BC Labour Heritage Centre, the Freedom Socialist Party, Radical Women, the Harry Bridges Center for Labor Studies at the University of Washington, the Confederation of Canadian Unions (CCU), and the United Food and Commercial Workers of Canada (Local 1518).

I'd like to thank my friends and classmates who have helped me in innumerable ways over the course of my dissertation, including Alex Rachkov, Althea Thompson, Amaechi Okafor, Brandon Webb, Collin Bonnell, Dennis Tibil Bersong, Derek Garcia, Elliot Perrin, Fred Burrill, Gabryelle Iaconetti, Gideon Azure, Giselle Gonzalez Garcia, Indranil Chakraborty, Jess Larin, Keith Rollins, Kelann Currie-Williams, Lauren Laframboise, Mahmoud Elewa, Maxim Baru, Meaghan Landrigan-Buttle, Nicole Farrell, Portia Sifelani, Théa Bashore, Tim Chandler, Varda Nisar, Victoria Kelly, Wade Paul, Zach Mitchell, and Zitian Sun. Thank you to Donna Whittaker, Alycia Manning, and Helene Medeiros, history department support staffers, for your friendship as well as the ample moral, technical, and emotional support you gave me over the course of this project. I am so thankful for the supervision of Dr. Steven High, a model supervisor and academic who has worked with me on this project since I even applied to be his PhD student.

This project would have been impossible without my family. Thank you to my parents, Cathy and Daniel and grandparents, Claire, Richard, Thomas, and June, for raising me to respect all people. I would not be here if not for my grandmother, June, who has been a model for kindness, joy, and curiosity. To my sisters, Amy and Lynne, who continue the family legacy of hard-working mothers. Thank you to my Aunt Sandy, who has been there for me through all of this. To my nieces and nephew, who I've learned so much from and who provide endless moments of joy. Lastly, thank you to Jennifer Lake Goodman for your love, support, laughter, kindness, and patience. It means everything to me.

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List of Acronyms

AFL-CIO – American Federation of Labor - Congress of Industrial Organizations
AFSCME – American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees
AUCE – Association of University and College Employees
BCFL – British Columbia Federation of Labour
BCGEU – British Columbia Government Employees Union
BCLRB – British Columbia Labour Relations Board
CAIMAW – Canadian Association of Industrial Mechanical and Allied Workers
CASAW – Canadian Association of Smelter and Allied Workers
CCU – Confederation of Canadian Unions
CIO – Congress of Industrial Organizations
CLC – Canadian Labour Congress
CLUW – Coalition of Labor Union Women
COHDS – Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling
CRLA – California Rural Legal Assistance
CUPE – Canadian Union Public Employees
CUPW – Canadian Union of Postal Workers
FSP – Freedom Socialist Party
HEPB – Higher Education Personnel Board
HERE – Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees and Bartenders International Union
HEU – Hospital Employees Union
ILO – International Labour Organization
IUOE – International Union of Operating Engineers
IWW – Industrial Workers of the World
LMRDA – Labor Management Reporting and Disclosure Act of 1959
NDP – New Democratic Party
NLRB – National Labor Relations Board
NOLSW – National Organization of Legal Services Workers
NOW – National Organization of Women
OEIU/OPEIU – Office and Professional Employees International Union
RCMP – Royal Canadian Mounted Police
RCSW – Royal Commission on the Status of Women
RMG – Revolutionary Marxist Group
RW – Radical Women
SDS – Students for a Democratic Society
SEIU – Service Employees International Union
SFU – Simon Fraser University
SORWUC – Service, Office, Retail Workers' Union of Canada
SROC – Staff Rights Organizing Committee
SWP – Socialist Workers Party of the United States

TSSU – Teaching and Support Staff Union
UAW – United Auto Workers
UBC – University of British Columbia
UFCW – United Food and Commercial Workers
UFW – United Farm Workers
UIC – Unemployment Insurance Commission
ULWC – United Legal Workers of California
USWA – United Steelworkers of America
UW – University of Washington
UWU-I – United Workers Union – Independent
VWC – Vancouver Women's Caucus
WAGE – Union Women's Alliance to Gain Equality
WFSE – Washington Federation of State Employees
WWA – Working Women's Association

Introduction

My mother was a working woman, just like her mother, and her mother's mother. My great-grandmother, Albina, was the daughter of Québécois emigrants. Like most in her community, she made shoes in crowded New Hampshire shoe factories. Family legend has it that she was extremely good at her craft, which allowed her to actually buy a small home during the depths of the Great Depression. When my grandmother, Claire, reached working age in the 1950s, the New England shoe industry, which had previously supported multiple generations of workers, was in decline. As a result, my grandmother worked in retail as a salesclerk in a variety of department stores and pharmacies for most of the next fifty years, only retiring when my grandfather's declining health forced her to do so. When it was my mother's time to enter the workforce in the late 1970s, she benefited from the hard work of my grandparents as well as my grandfather's union contract as a postal worker. My mother, Cathy, unlike previous generations of women before her, went to university and received a Bachelor of Science degree before starting her working life as a lab technician. She worked in that field for the remainder of her life, dying from pancreatic cancer at the age of 49.

Despite getting what many consider a "good job" as a lab technician, Cathy was not exempt from workplace injury, arbitrary rules, or insufficient pay. Throughout my teenage years, she was forced to get a second job, this one part-time, in order to pay the mortgage on our own small home which she had scrimped and saved for. As a curious teenager and young adult, I often inquired about her experiences at work. She told me that while she dearly loved her co-workers and found the process of lab work fulfilling, she was unhappy with the sterile, corporate atmosphere created by her company's new owners. She also told me about her sore back and neck, injured through decades of repetitive microscope use, as well as low-pay and arbitrary scheduling. Despite working for decades at this company, seniority meant little more than a

plaque acknowledging her loyalty. These issues were not unique to my mother but, because she did not have the protection of a union, she was forced to endure them without recourse.

One day, when I was about twenty years old, my mom and I were talking about her job and, as usual, she was upset that the bosses did not treat her and her co-workers well. Armed with two years of undergraduate coursework, I naively asked "why don't you just form a union?" In her patient and loving way, she told me that it was not possible and that she just had to deal with her workplace problems as best she could. I was bewildered by the notion that, for some workers like my mother and grandmother, having a union felt virtually impossible. After years of maturing and studying, what I now realize is that she was fundamentally correct: the reality for most working people, especially those in female-typed jobs like lab technician and sales clerk, was and continues to be that accessing the power of a union is simply not possible for all but a lucky few.[1]

This dissertation project is an attempt to understand why so many working women in Canada and the United States, like my mother and grandmother and tens of millions of others, have not had a labour union to defend their rights in the workplace. It also seeks to explain how issues commonly understood as primarily benefiting working women, like maternity leave, gender pay equity, and opposition to workplace harassment, became union issues.[2] It does so by examining the formation of independent labour unions organized by feminist activists which adhered to the motto of "we can do it ourselves." Unlike existing unions, these feminist-inspired unions were governed by working women and were closely attuned to the specificities of

[1] In 1973, the unionization rate for private-sector women in the United States was about 16%, or approximately 1 in 6. By 2007, that number dropped to 6%, or approximately 1 in 17. Bruce Western and Jake Rosenfeld, "Unions, Norms, and the Rise in U.S. Wage Inequality," *American Sociological Review* 76, no. 4. 513.

[2] This study acknowledges that these are societal problems which are not now and have never been strictly 'women's issues.' It uses the frame of 'women's issues' as they were understood in the 1970s when feminist unions were at their peak.

'women's work.' It seeks to tell the history of working-class and socialist feminist activists who scholar Meg Luxton identified as having "developed a strong feminist presence in the labour movement and a significant working-class orientation in the women's movement."[3] Among the vanguard of these activists were feminist unions.

This thesis investigates the origins, actions, and decline of feminist movement-inspired labour unions on the West Coast of Canada and the United States from the late 1960s through the early 1980s. It examines four unions and one labour-focused non-profit organization which were based in three major cities on the West Coast. The Association of University and College Employees (AUCE) and the Service, Office and Retail Workers' Union of Canada (SORWUC) operated out of B.C.'s Lower Mainland, while Seattle's United Workers Union-Independent (UWU-I), and the San Francisco-based United Legal Workers of California (ULWC) were in the United States. Throughout the 1970s, several women's movement groups built or supported newly formed labour unions among those employed in predominantly female-typed jobs. While male workers were never excluded, women constituted the vast majority of members. These unions fought to improve the lives of all workers, with a special eye towards the needs of women. Rather than accepting what they viewed as secondary or subordinate status within existing unions, feminist unions organized separately from male-led unions, and drew parallels to their experiences in the women's movement.[4] They did so because to avoid creating "a union where power could fall to an elite few, where the majority of members are women but the

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[3] Meg Luxton. "Feminism as a Class Act: Working-Class Feminism and the Women's Movement in Canada," *Labour/Le Travail* 48 (Fall 2001), 64.

[4] "The argument against the independent feminist unions is one that has been traditionally used against the women's movement and its right to exist. Whenever we demand our own organizations we are accused of splitting the working class. It is a critical question for feminists: is it necessary for us to have our own organizations, our own independent power base, or can we win by influencing and infiltrating established male-dominated organizations?" Jackie Ainsworth et al. "Getting Organized in the Feminist Unions," in *Still Ain't Satisfied! Canadian Feminism Today*, (The Women's Press, 1982.) 137-138.

appointed officials are men."[5] In oral history interviews conducted in 2024-2025, a number of participants recounted feelings of discrimination and exclusion in early experiences with existing male-led unions and the broader activist left. In her study of women in the United Auto Workers in Canada, Pamela Sugiman described this orientation as part of a "gendered strategy" that incorporated both "reasoned decisions and emotional responses, calculated interests and compromises."[6] The unions built by these feminist activists fought for the liberation of women and workers at the same time. However, as oral history interviews have confirmed, institutional separation had a dual impact: without an external hierarchy to answer to, feminist unions broke new ground in terms of which workplaces could be organized, demands sought during bargaining, and how internal structures could be democratically organized. However, their ambitious attempts at organizing led to conflict with existing male-led unions who felt threatened by feminists entering what they considered "their turf." These conflicts, combined with increasingly strident anti-union orientation by national, state, and provincial governments, and an increasing interest in women workers and their unique needs within mainstream unions, led to a decline of independent feminist unionism in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

This thesis argues that the bold actions of the West Coast feminist unionist movement challenged the post-war labour relations system, male-led organized labour, and the women's movement to recognize women as full members of the wage-earning working class and to incorporate their unique demands for an end to gender-based sexual harassment, paid maternity leave, equal pay for equal work, and beyond. By drawing upon the principles and organizing tactics of the transnational women's liberation movement, feminist unions brought these ideas

[5] Ainsworth et al. 137-138.

[6] Pamela Sugiman, *Labour's Dilemma: The Gender Politics of Auto Workers in Canada, 1937-1979*. (University of Toronto Press, 1994). 8.

into the labour movement, and, in the process, developed an effective form of union organizing which emphasized peer-to-peer organizing, strong internal democratic practices, and a close relationship with the women's movement. In short, feminist unionists were able to relate to women workers as whole people, both as women and members of the working class. Though they did not fulfill their dream of organizing tens of millions of working women, this method has been found in a number of successful organizing campaigns in the years since the movement's collapse, including by worker-organizers involved in several recent high-profile organizing campaigns, including at Amazon, Starbucks, and Tesla.[7]

Though I was raised by working women, I did not initially set out to research feminist unions. I only became aware of the topic through an interest in the history of left-wing labour activism since 1945 and preparing for my comprehensive exams. However, I soon became fascinated by the topic and found a number of largely untapped archives. Like historian Alice Kessler-Harris, I have come to see the importance of gender "not out of an effort to reject class but as an attempt to understand it in its full complexity."[8] This thesis is based on oral history interviews and archival and periodical research. In winter 2023 and summer 2024, I undertook extended research trips to the West Coast, during which I examined archival materials at the University of British Columbia (UBC), Simon Fraser University (SFU), University of Washington (UW), San Francisco State University (SFSU), and Stanford University. I have also traveled from Montreal to Ottawa on several occasions to examine material at Library and Archives Canada (LAC) and the University of Ottawa.

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[7] Eric Blanc, *We Are the Union: How Worker-to-Worker Organizing Is Revitalizing Labor and Winning Big* (University of California Press, 2025).

[8] Alice Kessler-Harris, *Gendering Labor History* (University of Illinois Press, 2007). 7

Between July 2024 and July 2025, I conducted fourteen oral history interviews with key feminist union participants. Scholars of both women and workers have used oral histories to fill the gap in the archives as well as get at the deeper meaning of personal histories.[9] Participants were initially identified through a close examination of archival sources. This led to me contacting existing organizations, including the British Columbia Labour Heritage Centre, the Freedom Socialist Party/Radical Women, and the National Legal Services Organization, which put me in contact with potential interviewees. In some cases, individuals identified in the archives were found through internet searches. These interviews, all of which occurred over Zoom or by phone, were between 30 minutes and 90 minutes in length. They were focused on personal histories as well as on histories of collective action.

The term 'feminist union' is used throughout this study because all of the organizations were influenced by women's liberation or socialist-feminist groups formed during the peak of second-wave feminism in the late 1960s and mid-1970s.[10] Shaped by the movement's critiques of capitalism and patriarchy, feminist unions utilized collective bargaining, strikes, grievances and other labour tactics to fight for the unique needs of working women. Feminist unionism was a political project which meant identifying and fighting for the unique needs of working women.[11] This was not only meant to benefit disrespected and poorly compensated women but

[9] Joan Sangster, "Telling our stories: feminist debates and the use of oral history," *Women's History Review*, 3 no. 1, (2004), 5-28.

[10] Both of British Columbia's feminist unions were directly organized by members of the Working Women's Association, a spin-off from the Vancouver Women's Caucus. The United Workers Union-Independent in Seattle was closely linked to Radical Women and the Freedom Socialist Party, and the United Legal Workers of California had close ties with women's support groups including Union Women's Alliance to Gain Equality (WAGE) and The Women's Labor Project, sponsored by the National Lawyers Guild.

[11] These issues included paid maternity leave, elimination of the gender pay gap and workplace harassment, increased wages for female-typed jobs, promotions based on seniority, the elimination of unpaid workplace tasks like fetching coffee for bosses, and other issues. On a broader level, proponents of feminist unions wrote that, "The message of the women's movement has always been that "nobody can do it for us"; that women have the skills, competence and ability to organize to fight our oppression. The Association of University and College Employees

also viewed as a method of undermining capitalism. At the 1975 Working Women's Conference in San Francisco, keynote speaker Joyce Maupin said, "As a matter of fact, somebody figured out that if women got equal pay with men, it would cost $109 billion a year. Which is more than corporate profits. In other words, paying women the same as men would wipe out corporate profits. Not a bad idea!"[12]

One common bargaining demand for feminist unions was a focus on raising the pay of the lowest paid members rather than the higher paid ones. Accordingly, they fought for "across-the-board" increases which raised pay by a flat amount for all members. Writing about bank employees in Sweden, sociologist Joan Acker asserted that "a policy to raise women's wages would minimize individualized wage setting and favor general, across-the-board wage bargaining."[13] Local 1 of the Association for University and College Employees at UBC, with its 1,200 members, was the largest bargaining unit belonging to a feminist union and it took this equity-based approach to negotiating wage increases. As a 1973 resolution stated,

> The yearly wage increase to all UBC employees should be the burden of the administration and not lower paid workers. We all experience the same rate of inflation, the same exorbitant rents and food prices. Our lesser paid fellow workers, by denying them the same rate of increase as higher paid people, will feel the effects of inflation even more, since they are less able to afford it. We want a fair contract for everyone. 40% of the employees at UBC make under $500. Everyone deserves a decent standard of living and a decent wage.[14]

(AUCE), and the Service, Office and Retail Workers Union of Canada (SORWUC), both independent feminist unions, are concrete examples of this struggle." Jackie Ainsworth et al. "Getting Organized in the Feminist Unions," in *Still Ain't Satisfied! Canadian Feminism Today*, (The Women's Press, 1982), 133.

[12] Maupin, Joyce. "Union Women's Alliance to Gain Equality (Union Wage) 1975 Working Women's Conference." California Revealed, n.d. https://californiarevealed.org/do/4ca988d9-716d-4ce5-a29d-2db043bb5681.

[13] Joan Acker. "Thinking about wages: The gendered wage gap in Swedish banks" *Gender & Society* 5, no. 3 (1991): 405.

[14] While the source says "rate," the resolution was supportive of across-the-board increases. "WAGE INCREASE VERSUS PERCENTAGE INCREASE" AUCE fonds, 1973 rbsc-arc-1021-021-001-019-pdf.pdf https://open.library.ubc.ca/media/stream/pdf/auce/1.0376364/18

In a contract proposal resolution passed the following year, Local One's membership instructed their contract committee to negotiate for a $250 per month across-the-board raise. The resolution rhetorically asked, "why are we being paid less than the average provincial wage?" To which it responded, "one very big reason is because the great majority of clerical workers are women." Thus, in addition to being monetarily recognized for their work and easing growing concerns about the cost of living, the across-the-board raise was intended to "eradicate the wage discrimination between "male" and "female" job categories."[15] The local's first contract, signed later that year after a wildcat strike, included a $225 across-the-board wage increase in addition to numerous other improvements, including a ground-breaking provision for fully-paid maternity leave paid by the employer.[16]

In 1999, historian Marcel van der Linden issued a call to American labour historians to forgo what he called the prevailing "methodological nationalism," i.e. a "strict separation of studies of the United States from those of other countries."[17] Despite the increasingly interwoven nature of labour and economics in North America during the twentieth century, scholars have generally taken this nationalistic lens to the history of organized labour in North America. Since at least the late nineteenth-century, the two countries and their working-classes have shared similar legal frameworks and their labour relations systems have been dominated by the same corporations and international unions since the late 19th-century.[18] Even periods of labour

[15] "Contract Proposal to be voted on April 18th membership meeting Graduate Student Center Ballroom 5:15 "WAGES!!," AUCE fonds, April 1974

[16] "UBC Employees Vote," *The Province*, August 30, 1974, 2.

[17] Marcel van der Linden, "Transnationalizing American Labor History," *The Journal of American History*, 86, No. 3, December 1999.

[18] In response to rising nationalist sentiments in Canada in the 1970s, a number of historians and activists wrote about the contested history of international unionism in Canada. Robert H. Babcock, *Gompers in Canada: a study in American continentalism before the First World War.* (University of Toronto Press, 1974). Roger Howard

revolt have mirrored each other.[19] This thesis, therefore, by examining the feminist union movement on the West Coast, applies a transnational lens to labour history by recognizing the interconnectedness of labour organizations and activists across national boundaries. The subjects of this study, feminist unions and those who devoted themselves to them, confirm many of van der Linden's arguments. They were, as van der Linden described of the broader labour movement, "hardly concerned with [national] borders" and traveled freely across the US-Canada border for conferences as well as to share ideas and report on their success and failures. Their origins and closest ties were to the feminist movement, a global effort which drew in women and their allies across every region and continent.

While historians have long noted similarities among the Pacific Northwest, sub-national entities of Oregon, Washington, and British Columbia, the larger West Coast was home to a transnational network which went beyond national and sub-regional boundaries.[20] This region, stretching from British Columbia in the north to California in the south, constituted a transnational region which saw the proliferation of a wide number of social movements.[21] The West Coast has long been one of the epicenters for political radicalism in North America and New Left activists were able to tap into many of the region's labour and women's movement

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and Jack Scott, "International unions and the ideology of class collaboration," in *Capitalism and the national question in Canada,* edited by Gary Teeple (University of Toronto Press, 1972), 67-88.

[19] Craig Heron, *The Canadian Labour Movement: A Short History Third Edition* (James Lorimer & Company Publishers, 2012) xvii.

[20] There is an extensive historiography on the history of the Pacific Northwest. For example: Kornel Chang, *Pacific Connections: The Making of the U.S.-Canadian Borderlands* (University of California Press, 2012).

[21] Previous histories of the North American West have been marked by the concept of Western exceptionalism, i.e. the belief that this region was uniquely radical, uniquely wild, and separate from other parts of the continent and world. This is not the argument put forth in this dissertation. Instead, as Mark Leier has suggested, this regional history treats the West Coast not as an inherently exceptional region but "as a case study, as a field of investigation in which theory can be applied, tested, and criticized." Mark Leier, "W[hither] Labour History: Regionalism, Class, and the Writing of BC History," BC Studies, Number 111, Autumn 1996, 73.

organizations when they turned to new union organizing.[22] Knowledge was transmitted through a variety of ways, including conferences, individual travel, letter-writing, and exchanges of organizational newsletters. In October 1969, the Vancouver Women's Caucus' "Women: Reform or Revolution?" conference brought 200 activists from across the West Coast to the University of British Columbia campus.[23] In April 1971, the VWC and the Voice of Women co-sponsored the Vancouver Indochinese Women's Conference at UBC which brought together 600 activists from Canada and the United States to strategize their fights against imperialism and the Vietnam War.[24] Historian Candice Klein argues that feminists, particularly lesbians, "used their connections with one another to form long lasting political and cultural networkers, grounded in their newfound sisterhood."[25] In 1973, the West Coast Lesbian Conference was held at University of California-Los Angeles and, a year later, the Third World Women's Conference and Festival held at the University of Washington, all of which highlight the political diversity of this women's conference culture.[26] In April 1975, a West Coast Conference of Socialist-Feminist

[22] San Francisco was home to a number of alternative labour organizing efforts, including among women sweatshop workers in the city's Chinatown. Jesse Drew. "San Francisco Labor in the 1970s" in *Ten Years that Shook the City: San Francisco 1968-1978.* Editor Chris Carlsson. (City Light Books, 2011).

[23] Specifically, participants from outside of British Columbia traveled from the Canadian provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan, and the U.S. states of California, Idaho, and Washington. Liz Briemberg, "Beginnings Women's Caucus," *Vancouver Women's Caucus: A Women's Liberation History Project*, www.vancouverwomenscaucus.ca

[24] Candice Klein, ""They Didn't Even Realize Canada Was a Different Country:" Canadian Left Nationalism at the 1971 Vancouver Indochinese Women's Conference" *Labour / Le Travail*, Issue 84, 2019.

[25] Candice Klein, " 'We Thought We Were the Only Lesbians in the World': 1971 Vancouver and the Rise of Lesbian and Transnational Feminist Identities Between Canada and the USA," *Gender & History*, 2025, 390.

[26] Alyssa A. Samek "Violence and identity politics: 1970s lesbian-feminist discourse and Robin Morgan's 1973 West Coast Lesbian Conference keynote address," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 13:3, (2016) 232-249; Tiana U. Wilson. "The Emerald City in Technicolor: Second-Wave Feminism, Solidarity Practices, and the Seattle Third World Women, 1971-1976. *Journal of Women's History*, Volume 37, Number 3, Fall 2025, 57-78.

Organizations in San Francisco was attended by approximately 200 members of nine socialist-feminist organizations from Washington state, Oregon, and California.[27]

Throughout these years, Union Women's Alliance to Gain Equality (WAGE), a non-profit of experienced labour union women founded in 1971, acted as a vital hub for information sharing between organizations across the region. In November 1975, the group brought hundreds of West Coast women worker-organizers to San Francisco.[28] These conferences brought motivated, often radicalized, women together to discuss strategies, debate key topics, and share knowledge gained through their experiences. Unscheduled interpersonal time was also key. As one conference attendee reflected,

> sleeping, eating and talking together built a sisterhood and fostered an exchange of opinions that the Conference was designed to produce. It was here on our living room floors, the brunch at the Women's Center, the Conference dance, and the Christopher Street parade, that sisters really got it TOGETHER.[29]

Through sharing newsletters and other forms of network-building, British Columbia's feminist unionists looked as much to the activities of their sisters in Washington and California as elsewhere in Canada. Likewise, San Francisco-based Union WAGE members who wanted to prioritize support for independent unions viewed Vancouver-based SORWUC as "a wonderful example."[30] Letters to the editors show that *The Pedestal*, the newspaper published by the

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[27] Berkeley-Oakland Women's Unions, "Report on the West Coast Conference of Socialist Feminist Organizations" Jan Arnold - Union W.A.G.E. Collection, 2009/055 (2-8)

[28] Joyce Maupin. "Union Women's Alliance to Gain Equality (Union Wage) 1975 Working Women's Conference." California Revealed, n.d. https://californiarevealed.org/do/4ca988d9-716d-4ce5-a29d-2db043bb5681.

[29] Though the writer is referring to another conference, it is representative of the experiences of many attendees of various women's conferences throughout this period. Jeanne Cordova. "Sisterhood and Non-Sisterhood At Gay Women's West Coast Conference," *Everywoman*, Volume 2, Issue 10, July 9, 1971.

[30] Private Correspondence between Pat Barter (Christie) and Joyce Maupin, January 6, 1977, Box 8, Folder 17, Data Center records, 1934-1996, Labor Archives and Research Center at San Francisco State University, San Francisco, California.

Vancouver Women's Caucus, had subscribers in San Francisco and women's liberation newspapers published in Los Angeles and the San Francisco Bay Area were among a number of periodicals advertised by the VWC.[31]The interwoven nature of the West Coast women's movement is also exemplified in the migration patterns of some participants themselves. For example, at least two U.S. emigres were members of the Vancouver Women's Caucus.[32] Marylee Stephenson, an early scholar of Vancouver's women's liberation movement, earned a BA from the University of California-Berkeley in 1967 before moving northward and being awarded a PhD from the Department of Anthropology and Sociology at UBC in 1975.[33] Because of these close connections, the West Coast is an ideal region for studying the growth of the feminist union movement from the late 1960s to the early 1980s.

After witnessing intense sexism at a 1969 anti-Vietnam War demonstration, New York activist Ellen Willis wrote that a "genuine alliance with male radicals will not be possible until sexism sickens them as much as racism. This will not be accomplished through persuasion, conciliation, or love, but through independence and solidarity."[34] The necessity of independent women's organizations guided by the principle of solidarity was a core feature of the women's liberation movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Feminist unions, women's unions, and women's committees were three separate but related manifestations of this principle and it is important to understand the distinction between them. All three were modeled after the informal

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[31] "Newspapers," *The Pedestal*, Volume 3, Issue 1, January 1971.

[32] Henry John, "American Exiles Beyond The Politics of the Draft: Nudity, Feminism, and Third World Decolonization in Vancouver, 1968-71," BC Studies, Number 205, Spring 2020, 45.

[33] Marylee Stephenson. "Being In Women's Liberation: A Case Study in Social Change." (PhD diss. University of British Columbia, 1975).

[34] J. Zeitz, "Rejecting the Center: Radical Grassroots Politics in the 1970s — Second-Wave Feminism as a Case Study" Journal of Contemporary History, Vol. 43, No. 4 (October, 2008), 678.

consciousness-raising groups which became widespread during the early years of the second-wave feminist movement.[35] Women's unions were women-only organizations which had socialist-feminist politics.[36] The most prominent of these was the Chicago Women's Liberation Union.[37] While there was significant overlap in the aims of these groups, a key difference was that feminist unions were founded as legally-recognized bargaining units which could not discriminate against members of any gender. While most of the members of feminist unions were women, there was no legal or de facto practice of excluding male members from full participation. For unions acting as the legal representative, this would have constituted illegal discrimination as well as being antithetical to the worldviews of these activists. In fact, feminist unions represented a variety of male workers. Some sought out membership and actively participated in union activities, while others, including the technicians at Simon Fraser University, sought to steer their union on a more traditional path.[38] The most enthusiastic male participants were, perhaps unsurprisingly, those who supported the socialist-feminist unionism promoted by women's liberation activists. Within feminist unions, the politics of militancy and moderation did not break along gendered lines. At times, men expressed more solidly feminist positions and found themselves opposed by more conservative women members and vice versa. The experiences of male feminists reveals that gender alone did not determine members' attitudes toward feminism or a more robust approach to trade unionism.

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[35] Linda Briskin, "Union Women and Separate Organizing," in *Women Challenging Unions: Feminism, Democracy, and Militancy*. Eds Linda Briskin and Patricia McDermott (University of Toronto Press, 1993), 91.

[36] "Women's Liberation Unions," *Marxists Internet Archive Encyclopedia*, accessed September 15, 2025. https://www.marxists.org/glossary/orgs/w/o.htm

[37] "Chicago Women's Liberation Union Herstory Project," accessed September 5, 2025, https://www.cwluherstory.org/

[38] Interviews were conducted with several of male members of feminist unions, all of whom were enthusiastic about their experiences. See Henry Noble interview, July 8, 2024; Jack Gegenberg interview, September 30, 2024; Ian Mackenzie interview, July 21, 2025.

Another kind of women's labour activism which developed during this period was women's committees.[39] These organizations were formed within existing trade unions by activist members who sought to improve contract language, increased participation in union governance, and structural changes which would allow for greater participation by women members.[40] Feminist unions and women's committees both fought to improve the conditions of women workers, in both the labour movement and society at-large. unions, by contrast, engaged in direct organizing of women workers and believed that, by empowering them to run their own unions, women would gain self-confidence and skills necessary to combat sexism and improve their working conditions. By contrast, women's committees were internal pressure groups which advocated for their unions, and the larger labour movement, to fight for women's rights in both collective bargaining and society at large. Linda Briskin has also highlighted how women's committees have been key in the fights against racism and homophobia in the labour movement.[41]

Historiography

The history of feminist unions has been significantly under-researched, and scholars of second-wave feminism and/or labour history have yet to produce studies of all but one of the unions which constitute the core of this dissertation. This has occurred for a multitude of reasons, including their relatively small sizes, the relative recency of their organizing, and their socio-

[39] Janice Ruth Foley. "Redistributing Union Power to Women: The Experiences of Two Women's Committees," PhD diss. 1995, University of British Columbia.

[40] Besides feminist unions, a multitude of working women's organizations were founded in the 1970s. Two of the most prominent support and advocacy groups were the Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW), which formed in the United States in 1974 and was only open to AFL-CIO affiliates, and Organized Working Women (OWW), an Ontario-based group founded in 1976 which was open to all unionized women workers, regardless of affiliation. Silke Roth. *Building Movement Bridges: The Coalition of Labor Union Women* (Praeger, 2003).

[41] Briskin, 92-93.

political position as socialist feminist. While only Julia Smith has examined the institutional history of one of the unions, SORWUC, this dissertation is a first attempt at looking at this historical phenomenon, particularly beyond the scope of a singular union. Thus, for three of the four unions in this study, this is the first examination of their institutional histories. It is also the first time a scholar has followed the linkages and continuities between feminist union organizing on either side of the border.

Historians and labour studies scholars have paid increasing attention to organized labour in the United States during the 1970s. Perhaps the best-known monograph on the subject is Jefferson Cowie's *Stayin' Alive: the 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class*. [42] Cowie argues that the decade began with great promise for the working-class but, due to a lack of cohesion on the part of reformers and the period's economic unraveling, the United States became "a republic of anxiety." He contends that the "profundity in the nothingness of the decade" was its "greatest and most tragic legacy." Cowie conceptualizes the working class as the "unionized voting block from the New Deal to the 1970s." While admitting that this definition is imperfect and nodding at a broader notion of class, this dissertation asserts that his notion of working class is fundamentally incorrect and that the blue-collar workers who built militant unions in the 1930s represented only a small portion of the actual working class. Though Cowie does discuss various marginalized groups of workers like women, farmworkers, public sector employees, and their efforts to build working-class power, Cowie's definition of who belonged to the working class was overwhelmingly white, male, and relatively financially stable. Instead, this dissertation demonstrates that while many industrial workers faced great difficulties during and after the 1970s, other sectors of the working class, including those in female-typed jobs,

[42] Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin' Alive: the 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (The New Press, 2010) 18.

sought to not only unionize but to revolutionize the broader labour movement. Public sector militancy was a major feature of the 1970s and it was the failure of the old labour movement to successfully incorporate and empower working class white-collar women in the private sector at the same rate it did blue-collar workers which contributed to the anxiety and disappointment that became as prevalent as Cowie accurately described.

Lane Windham's *Knocking on Labor's Door: Union Organizing in the 1970s and the Roots of a New Economic Divide*, argues that the 1970s was a decade filled with "tremendous organizing efforts" among women, racial minorities, and other previously unorganized groups. By centering the "hopes and aspirations" of "workers who tried to form unions, whether they won or not," she argues against Cowie's defeatist narrative of history which casts the 1970s as a period defined solely by working-class segmentation and failure.[43] The book is written with the eye of a labour organizer; Windham is a former staffer at AFL-CIO headquarters and a staff organizer with various mainstream unions. While it vividly captures the organizing efforts of unorganized workers who sought to win a union, it does not sufficiently examine the impact mainstream organized labour had on the failure to organize working women nor does it adequately address the importance of the women's movement to this organizing. The pages that follow build off of Windham's history of labour organizing by infusing it with new perspectives.

Feminist unionism was not the only worker-led movement against bureaucratic and conservative business unionism in North America.[44] Rank-and-file union members across North

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[43] Lane Windham. *Knocking on labor's door: Union organizing in the 1970s and the roots of a new economic divide*. (UNC Press Books, 2017), 3.

[44] Several books and articles on this topic have been published in recent years. See Aaron Brenner et al. *Rebel Rank and File: Labor Militancy and Revolt From Below During The Long 1970s.* (Verso, 2010); Steve Early. *The civil wars in US labor: Birth of a new workers' movement or death throes of the old?*. (Haymarket Books, 2011); Cal Winslow, *Labor's Civil War in California: The NUHW Healthcare Workers' Rebellion,* (PM Press 2010); Sean Antaya. "The New Left at Work: Workers' Unity, the New Tendency, and Rank-and-File Organizing in Windsor, Ontario, in the 1970s". *Labour / Le Travail*, 85, 2020 53–89.

America fought back against their entrenched union's leadership by forming caucuses, engaging in wildcat strikes, and asserting their democratic rights as union members. Herman Benson, a longtime union democracy activist, hailed reform movements within established unions, including the 1972 victory of Miners for Democracy and the 1991 victory of Teamsters for a Democratic Union, as creating "the moral atmosphere for change."[45] These efforts have attracted the interest of a number of scholars; many of whom were veterans of the New Left who had been engaged in these efforts. As such, this study should be viewed as a counterpart to other studies of working-class resistance during this period.

In response to growing levels of organization by white-collar public sector workers, U.S. President John F. Kennedy issued Executive Order 10988 in January 1962. This Order granted federal employees the right to collective bargaining for the first time. In Canada, public sector organizing, combined with the growing popularity of the social democratic New Democratic Party prompted the Liberal government to grant collective bargaining rights to federal employees in 1967 through the passage of the *Public Service Labour Relations Act*.[46] States (twenty-two out of fifty) and all Canadian provinces legalized the practice around this time as well.[47] Quickly, public sector unionization rates skyrocketed and soon, their numbers far surpassed those of the private sector. Despite this, there is a dearth of histories of post-war labour organizing in Canada, especially among white-collar workers. As labour scholars Stephanie Ross and Larry Savage have pointed out, the bulk of scholarship on public sector unions in Canada view their rise

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[45] Herman Benson. *Rebels, reformers, and racketeers: How insurgents transformed the labor movement*. (Association for Union Democracy, 2004), xiii.

[46] Craig Heron, *The Canadian Labour Movement: A Short History Third Edition* (James Lorimer & Company Publishers, 2012) 97.

[47] Joseph A. McCartin. (2008). ""A Wagner Act for Public Employees": Labor's Deferred Dream and the Rise of Conservatism, 1970–1976". Journal of American History. 95 (1): 123–148

through the lens of present, not their larger socio-political impact.[48] Over the past sixty years, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) has become the largest union in Canada through a combination of workplace organization and a series of mergers with other unions; several of were locals previously affiliated with the Association of University and College Employees (AUCE). Gary Chaison has written that large unions like CUPE and the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) "turn[ed] to absorptions as alternative to traditional organizing."[49] In the decades since these mergers, there is a lack of scholarship into the nature of these absorptions and/or mergers. One of the aims of Chapter 1 is to investigate the complicated circumstances which led AUCE Local 1 at the University of British Columbia to merge into CUPE.

There are no book length equivalents in Canadian history to either of the aforementioned works. Institutional histories partially tell these stories, as do case studies of a few individual organizing drives.[50] Chapter 5 of this dissertation highlights numerous half-hearted attempts at white-collar organizing by the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) in the almost two decades prior to the rise of feminist unions. For example, the short-lived Association of Commercial and Technical Employees organizing effort of the mid-1970s cost millions of dollars and involved both paid staffers and volunteer organizers without much success or scholarly attention. The bank worker organizing drive of the late 1970s-early 1980s, kickstarted by the Service, Office

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[48] Stephanie Ross and Larry Savage, *Public Sector Unions in the Age of Austerity* (Fernwood Publishers, 2013), 11.

[49] Gary N. Chaison. *Union Mergers In Hard Times: The View From Five Countries*. (Cornell University Press, 1996), 59.

[50] Sam Gindin, *The Canadian Auto Workers: The Birth and Transformation of a Union* (James Lorimer & Company Ltd., 1995); Bruce McLean, *A union amongst government employees : a history of the B.C. Government Employees' Union, 1919-1979*. (self-published, 1979); Bradley J. Pragnell. *Organizing Department Store Workers: The Case of the RWDSU at Eaton's, 1983-1987* (Industrial Relations Centre, Queen's University at Kingston, 1989); Patricia McDermott "The Eaton's Strike: We Wouldn't Have Missed It for the World!" in *Women Challenging Unions: Feminism, Democracy, and Militancy*. Linda Briskin, and Patricia McDermott, eds. (University of Toronto Press, 1993), 23-43.

and Retail Workers' Union of Canada (SORWUC) in 1977, has received the most scholarly attention of any organizing drive in post-war Canada.[51] While scholars have most often cited the shortcomings of labour law and its lack of enforcement for the failure of this organizing campaign, this dissertation asserts that the intervention of the Canadian Labour Congress and its efforts to obstruct SORWUC also played a causal role in limiting this drive. As a history of white-collar union organizing, this dissertation begins to expand on this topic in Canadian labour historiography.

The pages that follow also intervene into the history of wildcat strikes in post-war Canada and the larger question of public sector militancy. Bryan Palmer, who has written extensively on this topic, has argued that the wildcat strike wave of the mid-1960s was "most emphatically male undertakings, marked by bravado and the macho posturing of youth in a pre-feminist working-class cultural moment."[52] However, this dissertation challenges Palmer's assertion that male workers were solely behind the wildcat wave of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Feminist unions engaged in wildcat strikes at the University of British Columbia and the University of Washington in 1973 and 1974, respectively. Though these strikes were brief and, in the case of

[51] Graham S. Lowe, Bank Unionization in Canada: A Preliminary Analysis (University of Toronto, Centre for Industrial Relations, 1980); Allen Ponak and Larry F. Moore, "Canadian Bank Unionism: Perspectives and Issues," Relations industrielles/ Industrial Relations 36, no. 1 (1981): 3–34; Elizabeth Beckett, Unions and Bank Workers: Will the Twain Ever Meet? (Labour Canada, 1984) Rosemary Warskett, "Bank Worker Unionization and the Law" *Studies in Political Economy* 25, Spring 1988; Patricia Baker. "Some Unions Are More Equal Than Others: A Response to Rosemary Warskett's "Bank Worker Unionization and the Law"." *Studies in Political Economy* 34, no. 1 (1991): 219-233; Jane Suzanne Bailey, "Organizing the Unorganized" Revisited: An Analysis of the Efficacy of Labour Legislation in Facilitating Collective Representation in the Canadian Banking Sector (Queen's University, Industrial Relations Centre, 1991); Patricia Baker, "'I Know Now that You Can Change Things': Narratives of Canadian Bank Workers as Union Activists," in Sally Cole and Lynne Phillips, eds., *Ethnographic Feminisms: Essays in Anthropology* (Carleton University Press, 1995), 157–176. Julia Smith. "An Entirely Different Kind of Union: The Service, Office, and Retail Workers' Union of Canada (SORWUC), 1972-1986" *Labour/Le Travail*, 73 (Spring 2014).

[52] Bryan D. Palmer, *Canada's 1960s: The Ironies of Identity in a Rebellious Era* (University of Toronto Press, 2009), 216.

Washington, of limited effectiveness, it nonetheless demonstrates that feminist unionists spurred their co-workers into challenging the post-war labour legal framework. Moreover, other feminist unions, including AUCE Local 2 at Simon Fraser University, the ULWC, and multiple bargaining units within SORWUC, engaged in extended militant strikes which, while within existing legal frameworks, drew the attention of law enforcement. Feminist union members were often willing to risk arrest, fines, and loss of employment in order to secure their demands outside the narrow confines of the labour relations system. Citing labour statistics from 1960 to 2004, Linda Briskin has shown that "a dramatic reversal [occurred] in the long-standing dominance of private sector militancy" which points to "support [for] the general claim for the feminization of labour militancy."[53] Similarly, as Lauren Laframboise has shown, militant labour feminism grew throughout the decade, even extending into defensive actions against concession bargaining and deindustrialization.[54] As such, this dissertation contends that the militancy displayed by feminist unions in the 1970s should be viewed as a precursor to this shift toward the militancy of women workers in Canada and beyond.

Historians of women's labour have long argued that the field of labour history more broadly does not incorporate the perspectives of women, especially those labouring without a blue-collar. As Dorothy Sue Cobble wrote in 1999, "the overall narratives that dominate the field [of labour history] incorporate neither the history of female-dominated occupations and

[53] Linda Briskin, "Public sector militancy, feminization, and employer aggressions: Trends in strikes, lockouts, and wildcats in Canada from 1960 to 2004." in *Strikes Around The World 1968-2005*, Sjaak van der Velden, Heiner Dribbusch, Dave Lyddon, Kurt Vandaele (eds) (Aksant Academic Publishers, 2007), 102.

[54] Lauren Laframboise, ""La Grève de la fierté" Resisting Deindustrialization in Montréal's Garment Industry, 1977–1983," Labour / *Le Travail* 91, Spring 2023.

industries nor that of women's particular forms of collective action."[55] Sociologist Jennifer L. Pierce and others have since brought to light the interwoven nature of socialist-feminism and labour organizing in the United States during the 1970s.[56] Joan Sangster and Pamela Sugiman have written extensively about twentieth-century women's labour in Canada. Sugiman's analysis is primarily on the Old Left, with *Labour's Dilemma* examining the challenges of women who were members of the United Auto Workers in southern Ontario. Her critique of male labour leaders who structured the labour movement around "men's lives, men's visions, and men's needs" is vitally important to this study. Sangster has looked more closely at the New Left, arguing that rather than viewing "feminist efforts to critique, occupy, and redirect the labor movement in the long sixties" as a continuation of earlier feminist activity, their actions "are better characterized as a radical rupture with the past."[57] Like Sugiman, this dissertation is largely "about women's dilemmas, visions, and the realities of their lives. It also illustrates a larger process - how issues are shaped according to men's lives, men's visions, and men's needs." Feminist unions asserted themselves and their institutions into a labour movement which had only just begun to reckon with the presence of mobilized women and their unique needs. While their assertiveness was welcomed by some men, others believed that they needed to stay in their [subordinate] place in the movement.

Organization

[55] Dorothy Sue Cobble, "'A Spontaneous Loss of Enthusiasm': Workplace Feminism and the Transformation of Women's Service Jobs in the 1970s," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 56, no. 3 (Fall 1999): 23–44.

[56] Jennifer L. Pierce. "" Fed Up": A Clerical Workers' Manifesto Sparks a Comparable-Worth Campaign at the University of California at Berkeley, 1970–1974." *Journal of Women's History* 36, no. 3 (2024): 118-138 and Jennifer L. Pierce. ""We Were Democracy Mad:" Clerical Workers' Unionism, Antiracism, and Feminism at the University of California, Berkeley, 1966–1972." *International Labor and Working-Class History* 102 (2022): 181-199.

[57] Joan Sangster "Radical Ruptures: Feminism, Labor, and the Left in the Long Sixties in Canada," *American Review of Canadian Studies*, (2010) 40:1, 2.

This dissertation is organized around five case studies. Chapters one through four are histories of individual unions while chapter five is focused on the conflict between a feminist union and the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC). The first chapter examines the Association of University and College Employees (AUCE) Local 1 at the University of British Columbia (UBC). AUCE represented 2,500 clerical workers and support staff across most of British Columbia's colleges and universities, including UBC and Simon Fraser. It emerged from the Vancouver Women's Caucus (VWC) and was the largest and most established independent feminist union on the West Coast. It won major gains through collective bargaining, including an innovative provision for fully-paid maternity leave as well as significant wage increases for the lowest paid clerical workers. Paid maternity leave was later taken up by the larger labour movement and then provincial and federal governments across Canada. AUCE also played a crucial role in supporting the ambitious organizing goals of its sister union, SORWUC. However, the union's radicalism declined alongside the growth of neoliberal attacks on public institutions and the bargaining unit affiliated with CUPE in 1984.

Chapter 2 moves southward to the University of Washington in Seattle, where a combination of Trotskyist activists and militant rank-and-file clerical and support staff led the first strike in the university's history to halt a planned reclassification of clerical and support staff employees. The work-stoppage was opposed by the Washington Federation of State Employees and failed to stop the overhaul. However, the strikers regrouped under the banner of the United Workers Union-Independent (UWU-I). Rather than engage in collective bargaining, UWU-I was a solidarity union which defended members via grievances while working closely with the Trotskyist Freedom Socialist Party and Radical Women to infuse militancy and socialist-feminism into organized labour.

Chapter 3 examines the ecosystem of working women's organizations which emerged in the San Francisco Bay Area. Organized by the non-profit advocacy group Union WAGE, a November 1975 Working Women's Conference in San Francisco brought together organizers from across the region who had formed new, often independent unions grounded in feminist principles. One of these was the United Legal Workers of California (ULWC), a union of legal secretaries and clerical workers which was at the forefront of organizing legal service workers across California and nationwide. Though it was snubbed by male-led white-collar unions, the predominantly Mexican-American ULWC had the support of the United Farmworkers (UFW) as well as the National Lawyers Guild and the women's movement. With this support, the union was able to craft, negotiate, defend, and strike for multiple collective bargaining agreements which put an end to sexual harassment and unpaid work at their employer, California Rural Legal Assistance. The ULWC's success encouraged other legal service and non-profit workers to unionize as well.

Chapter 4 returns to British Columbia to examine private-sector white-collar organizing done by the Service, Office and Retail Workers' Union of Canada (SORWUC). The sister union of AUCE, SORWUC was a general union open to all women working in female-typed jobs, including stay-at-home mothers, home support workers, clerical workers, bank workers, daycare workers, bar and restaurant workers, and other groups viewed as marginal or unorganizable by mainstream unions. Tasking themselves with organizing the unorganized millions of working women, SORWUC sought to unite militant, democratic trade unionism with the principles of the women's liberation movement to produce major material and social gains for working-class women. Though it fell short of its goals, it helped spark organizing among a variety of women workers which improved conditions and inspired others. It also provided legal and moral support

to Stella Bliss, a working mother denied maternity-leave benefits whose court case and the larger outrage sparked changes to the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Chapter 5 examines the relationship between SORWUC and the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) and its affiliates. SORWUC successfully challenged an outdated Canadian Labour Relations Board ruling on bank worker organizing and had remarkable early success across British Columbia. Their success kickstarted an effort by several Canadian labour unions to organize bank workers. However, the CLC refused to cooperate with the feminist union and instead successfully squashed its nascent efforts. B.C. Labour Relations Board chair Paul C. Weiler called the CLC's campaign against SORWUC "a grievous self-inflicted wound" which hindered union organizing among bank workers and other female-typed jobs.[58]

Overall, this study of feminist unions on the West Coast of Canada and the United States seeks to explore the under-studied combination of feminist values and new independent union organizing in the 1970s. Despite immense opposition from power brokers in organized labour, state, provincial, and federal governments, and the business community, feminist unions showed that peer-to-peer organizing, a commitment to internal democracy, and close ties to the social movements could produce tangible results for working women and other marginalized people. The lasting impacts of West Coast feminist unions include the pioneering of paid maternity leave through collective bargaining (AUCE), the successful fight against workplace pregnancy discrimination (SORWUC), the infusion of class struggle politics into staid public sector unionism (UWU-I), and leadership in the effort to unionize legal service workers (ULWC). More broadly, the activities of feminist unions also helped more women access unions, even after affiliation and/or dissolution, including many of the lowest paid women workers in daycare and

[58] Paul Weiler, *Reconcilable Differences: New Directions in Canadian Labour Law* (The Carswell Company Limited, 1980), 24.

home support staff. Above all, feminist unions were a key part of the broad effort to make the hallowed labour movement concepts of solidarity and ‘an injury to one is an injury to all’ a reality.

Chapter 1:

The Association of University and College Employees (AUCE): New Organizing and Winning Maternity Leave at the University of British Columbia (UBC)

> UBC clerical workers concluded that our only hope for success was to organize our own independent union. We didn't want a union where power could fall to an elite few, where the majority of members are women but the appointed officials are men.
> - Jackie Ainsworth, Ann Hutchison, Susan Margaret, et al., 1980.[1]

In May 1974, the University of British Columbia's (UBC) clerical and support staff were fed up and decided to act. Having only recently formed as the Association of University and College Employees (AUCE), whose members were more accustomed to direct action rather than following a circuitous labour relations system, a wildcat strike was set. Organizer Ray Galbraith wrote in its aftermath that "for four hours there existed the spectacle of a Director of Personnel with no supporting staff to direct. It is like a conductor without a symphony; he can only go through the motions."[2] Though the university had threatened to punish them, the unity of the 800 or so participants meant that no one was fined or otherwise punished for the action. This strike, occurring just weeks after AUCE was legally recognized, set the tone for the AUCE, Local 1. Not a typical union, Local 1 was founded by those schooled by the protest movements of the 'long sixties' who sought to utilize the power of their own labour, organized collectively, to overcome sexism and other societal problems. Many were part of the New Left, a rebellious generation which came into adulthood beginning in the 1960s whose values included anti-authoritarianism, skepticism of bureaucracies, and demand for participatory structures. These

[1] Jackie Ainsworth et al., "Getting Organized ... in the Feminist Unions," in *Still Ain't Satisfied! Canadian Feminism Today*, eds. Maureen Fitzgerald et al., eds. (The Women's Press, 1982), 134.

[2] "831 Study Contract" *Across Campus*, June 4, 1974.

concepts had a profound impact on feminist union organizing, especially in the unions which formed among clerical and support staff on the University of British Columbia (UBC) and Simon Fraser University (SFU) campuses.[3] Historian Ian Milligan described the SFU campus as "the site of the most radical student upheavals in Canada."[4] At UBC, growing feminist consciousness led to the launch of the field women's studies and the Women's Office Collective.[5] Efforts quickly shifted from a focus on campus efforts to an emphasis on the larger community. Students and academic workers at UBC and SFU combined with other working women to form the Vancouver Women's Caucus (VWC). Soon, members of the VWC turned to union organizing and AUCE was born.

Prior to this dissertation, AUCE has been little more than a footnote in scholarly studies of Canadian women and the labour movement. This has occurred despite its key position representing 2,500 clerical and support staff at multiple institutions, including B.C.'s two largest universities, and its forerunning efforts to win maternity leave and other "women's issues" through collective bargaining. As such, this chapter is the first attempt to understand the union and the unique values upon which it was organized. Utilizing oral history interviews and recently digitized documents, this chapter examines how working women and men built a union culture during the turbulent 1970s. AUCE was part of the broader women's liberation movement to create feminist unions which, through the principles of self-governance and class conflict, would reshape society. As such, this chapter argues that feminist unionism played a decisive role in not

[3] Herbert Marcuse was one of the foremost theorists who influenced the New Left of the 1960s. Herbert Marcuse and Biddy Martin, "The Failure of the New Left?," *New German Critique* 18 (1979): 3-11.

[4] Ian Milligan, *Rebel Youth: 1960s Labour Unrest, Young Workers, and New Leftists in English Canada* (UBC Press 2014). 30.

[5] Annette Kolodny, "A Sense of Discovery, Mixed with a Sense of Justice": Creating the First Women's Studies Program in Canada." *NWSA Journal* 12, no. 1 (Spring, 2000), 146.

only winning a union at UBC but also in securing ground-breaking provisions such as significantly increasing pay and fully-paid maternity leave in their first contract. The union's structure, which emphasized participatory democracy, and solidly feminist values created an unusual amount support from UBC's clerical workers and support staff, thus allowing them to overcome barriers which had blocked mainstream unions in the recent past.

The VWC became best known for the abortion caravan, an effort which scholar Judy Rebick calls "the first national action of the women's movement in Canada."[6] For three weeks, feminist activists travelled from Vancouver to Ottawa and, in the process, drew attention to the limitations of the Criminal Law Amendment Act. Passed in May 1969, this hallmark legislation was a limited victory for LGBT and women's rights activists, as it partially decriminalized same-sex sexual activity and allowed abortion under certain conditions. Unhappy with the continuation of restrictions, Vancouver feminist activists "kick-started second-wave feminist activism in Canada."[7] While the VWC's caravan was successful in terms of drawing awareness from both the general public and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), the group did not limit itself to just questions of healthcare access and homophobia.[8] The Working Women's Workshop, a sub-group within the VWC, was founded with the same daring spirit just a month prior to the caravan. Socialist feminists such as Jean Rands believe that organizing women workers as both women and workers was a necessity for a working-class revolution. Jean Rands was the most experienced activist in the VWC, having run for mayor of Vancouver in 1966 at the age of 21

[6] Judy Rebick, *Ten Thousand Roses: The Making of a Feminist Revolution* (Penguin Canada, 2005), 35.

[7] Rebick, 35.

[8] Sethna Christabelle and Steve Hewitt. "Clandestine Operations: The Vancouver Women's Caucus, the Abortion Caravan, and the RCMP," *The Canadian Historical Review* 90, no. 3, (September 2009), 464.

with the backing of the League for Socialist Action, a small Trotskyist political party.[9] In a May 1969 position paper, Rands wrote that the struggle to improve the status of women "would involve serious confrontations with capitalism and the state; and their solution would pose general structural problems in a sharper way." Rands continued that the achievement of the immediate goals of socialist feminists such as "freely available birth control and abortion, and day care centres adequate to serve all women" would also "involve sharpening the contradictions of capitalist society."[10]

In February 1970, *The Pedestal*, which was the VWC's newspaper, began publishing articles about the experiences of secretaries in academia alongside the necessity of working women organizing in the trade union movement.[11] Jean Rands was again at the forefront of pushing the VWC toward workplace organizing. The newspaper wrote that "more and more women in the work force are interested in organizing themselves around those issues which affect them as *women* workers: equal pay for equal work, job security, equal opportunity, day care, maternity leave, sexual objectification on the job etc."[12] Rather than looking to the existing male dominated trade union movement, the VWC looked to the collective experiences of other working women for guidance, writing "since many of us are members of unions, pieces of this information are known by us as individuals. We can learn important lessons from each other's

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[9] In 1966, Jean Rands ran for mayor of Vancouver as a 21-year old independent. Described in *The Province* as a Marxist, she received 6,534 votes out of 87,450 cast. (7.4%) A newspaper described her vote total as "more support than expected" and "a major factor in the outcome." "Campbell gets nod with surprise vote," *The Province*, December 15, 1966, 1

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[11] *The Pedestal* was Canada's first feminist periodical. Launched in September 1969 by the VWC, it reflected VWC's orientation toward universities. When the VWC disbanded in 1971, the newspaper continued to be published until 1974. "Vancouver Women's Caucus: A Women's Liberation History Project," https://www.vancouverwomenscaucus.ca/pedestal/

[12] "Working Women Organize," *The Pedestal*, February 1970, 5.

experience."[13] Their "major task," was "the organization of the 88% of women who are not organized in any way."[14] Representing the fusion of the different branches of the feminist movement, labour feminists argued that women's liberation could be achieved, in part, by winning the right to child care and equal pay for equal work on the job. For several years, they primarily supported working women who were on strike and/or in the process of organizing. In 1972, WWA members decided that new unions were needed to organize working women as envisioned. Helen Potrebenko, an activist involved in organizing both AUCE and the Service, Office, Retail Workers Union of Canada (SORWUC), recalled that "we had to form our own union if there was going to be any new organizing. The existing unions were not fighting for women's issues."[15]

Beyond the women's liberation movement, British Columbia was also at the core of the breakaway movement of unions that sought to empower Canadians to democratize and take control of their own labour organizations by formally separating them from their international unions based in the United States. The Canadian breakaway movement, which sought to establish national sovereignty, Left politics, and democratic practices among organized labour in Canada, was strongest in British Columbia and these newly established organizations provided integral assistance to both AUCE and SORWUC. Jackie Ainsworth, a pivotal figure in both of B.C.'s feminist unions, recalled "not only did they give us background knowledge…they helped us with writing our constitution and our bylaws. I don't think it would have happened without

[13] *The Pedestal* "Working Women Organize."

[14] *The Pedestal* "Working Women Organize."

[15] Helen Potrebenko, "My Life in SORWUC: Memories of a Feminist Union," n.d., Box 17 File 16, Service, Office and Retail Workers Union of Canada (SORWUC) fonds, University of British Columbia Library Rare Books and Special Collections. (unpublished manuscript), typescript.

the breakaway Canadian union movement."[16] AUCE was the child of these movements. It was not an only child, however.[17] While its sister union, the Service, Office, Retail Workers Union of Canada (SORWUC), sought to organize a wide swath of women, AUCE concentrated its efforts on the low paid and overwhelmingly female clerical and library workers who made the universities and colleges across the province run.

Several other factors encouraged the growth of an independent feminist union at B.C. 's universities and colleges, including the historic election of a New Democratic Party (NDP) government in 1972. One of the first orders of business for the NDP was the creation and empowerment of the British Columbia Labour Relations Board (LRB) to revamp the labour code and simplify union organizing. Another factor was the province-wide boom in the number and size of higher educational institutions which began immediately after World War II ended and continued in ever-greater numbers over the course of the next three decades. This trend was not unique to B.C. and occurred across Canada and beyond. The challenges and benefits of this expansion were laid out by UBC president John B. MacDonald in an influential 1962 report.[18] Overall, this expansion was part of a five-fold increase in provincial public sector spending between 1941 and 1971.[19] In the span of just seven years (1963-1970), six new higher educational institutions (three universities and three colleges) were chartered in the province.[20]

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[16] Jackie Ainsworth, interview with author, July 8, 2024

[17] While information will be shared which impacted all locals, the focus of this chapter is on AUCE Local 1. The AUCE-SORWUC relationship will be examined in greater detail in Chapter 4.

[18] This report outlined the ever-growing need to expand higher education in the province, expand its physical footprint, and attract qualified academics. John B. Macdonald, *Higher Education in British Columbia and a Plan For The Future*. The University of British Columbia (1962).

[19] Benjamin Isitt. *Militant Minority: British Columbia Workers and the Rise of a New Left, 1948-1972*. University of Toronto Press, 2011, 41.

[20] Bob Cowin, *Made In B.C.: A History of Postsecondary Education in British Columbia*. Self-published (2007).

Already existing institutions, such as UBC, expanded rapidly to accommodate the maturation of the post-war Baby Boom generation, with UBC's student enrolment increasing by more than 10,000 between 1960 and 1975, an increase of more than 55 percent.[21] This expansion meant that British Columbia's academic workforce had little to no experience with existing unions and that New Left activists, many of them university-educated and experienced in campus organizing, sought clerical and library positions at the new and/or expanded institutions. AUCE was thus organized by a convergence of multiple forces. Energized women's liberation movement activists, both on and off-campus and unaffiliated on-the-job organizers were aided by left-nationalist independent unions to develop and win a union for 1,200 clerical and support staff who worked for the province's flagship university.

Unlike many of the feminist unions in this study, mainstream white-collar unions were very interested in representing UBC's clerical workers. However, both the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and the Office and Technical Employees Union (OTEU) failed in their efforts prior to AUCE's formation.[22] Their clumsy attempts at organizing were met with frustration and spawned a growing hostility toward male-led mainstream unions which ultimately led to the formation of the Association of University and College Employees (AUCE) Local 1. The addition of energetic women's liberation movement activists and the development of a highly democratic constitution written by those on the job convinced skeptical clerical and

[21] UBC's total student enrolment expanded from 18,477 in 1960 to 28,728 by 1975. "Student Enrolment Figures," University of British Columbia Archives Blog (2018) https://archives.library.ubc.ca/general-history/student-enrolment/

[22] CUPE is a large Canadian union which represents public sector workers across the country. OTEU was the name of the Canadian affiliate of the much smaller Office and Professional Employees International Union (OPEIU), which is based in the United States. Joseph E. Finley, *White Collar Union,* (Octagon Books, 1975).

support staff to join the cause. Thus, as sociologists Larry Isaac and Lars Christiansen have shown, public sector workplace militancy was revitalized by the entrance New Left activists.[23]

In 1968, CUPE became the first union to attempt to organize UBC's clerical workers, an effort which was unsuccessful.[24] In October 1971, OTEU launched another organizing drive among clerical workers. By this time, CUPE already represented many blue-collar workers on campus, including food service workers, janitorial staff, and tradesmen.[25] The campaign benefited from increased sympathy after word spread that the university had harassed worker-organizers.[26] While the OTEU campaign was ongoing, CUPE launched a second unsuccessful bid for the membership of the clerical staff.[27] Helen Potrebenko, then part of the Working Women's Association, recalled that "neither union gave much support to the few campus activists who were doing all the signing up."[28] Moreover, on-the-job organizers resented the fact the male organizers sent to lead the effort had no experience with clerical or library work.[29]

While OTEU sought to organize clerical workers from across campus, CUPE concentrated on a department-by-department approach. A March 1972 speech by renowned trade unionist and feminist Madeleine Parent at UBC had a major impact on the future of clerical worker organizing. Parent told a daily newspaper and presumably the audience at her talk that

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[23] Larry Isaac and Steve McDonald. "Takin'it from the streets: How the sixties mass movement revitalized unionization." *American Journal of Sociology* 112, no. 1 (2006): 738.

[24] "UBC Office Staff Gets Union Help," *The Vancouver Sun*, April 5, 1968.

[25] "Union drive pushed," *The Vancouver Sun*, October 30, 1971.

[26] "Union charges unfair practices," *The Ubyssey*, October 14, 1971.

[27] Potrebenko, "My Life in SORWUC*,"* 19

[28] Potrebenko, "My Life in SORWUC," 19.

[29] Jean Rands, "Union Women's Alliance to Gain Equality (Union Wage) 1975 Working Women's Conference" Labor Archives and Research Center, November 8, 1975. http://archive.org/details/csfst_000041

“because, unless we are right there, men will wind up as leaders and bargainers. And when it comes time to negotiate, they will just go after items voted upon, but with no particular stress paid to" the issues of working women. To illustrate her point, she noted that "maternity clauses, for instance. Only women will put up a proper fight for these. After all, pregnancy is not a man's problem. We've got to be there to fight for those things.”[30] Frustration with mainstream, male-led unions, combined with Parent’s emphasis on women’s leadership in every step of the union process, led to the resignation of five women on the OTEU’s campus organizing committee.[31] In June, OTEU seemed to have pivoted away from organizing the entire university when it applied to represent UBC's all-male physical plant workers as a standalone bargaining unit.[32]

Jean Rands, a leading member of both the Working Women’s Association and later president of AUCE Local 1, told the 1975 Working Women’s conference that AUCE was established because existing unions had a negative image among working women and that they "don’t seem to take their organizing drives of women workers very seriously."[33] She described earlier organizing drives by mainstream unions as "not only a failure," but also "a terribly demoralizing experience for everyone who participated in it."[34] She claimed that campus organizing committee members were denied access by paid staffers to basic information, including how many co-workers had signed up and how long the drive would take. She also said that "they went through the whole drive without knowing how close they were to having a

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[30] "Where do women belong...'At the bargaining table'" *The Province*, March 11, 1972.

[31] "Union 'still strong' at UBC,” *The Vancouver Sun*, April 1, 1972.

[32] It is likely that this was done without consulting their clerical staff organizers, which would have increased their frustration with OTEU. "Labor board 'no' to UBC," *The Province*, October 5, 1972.

[33] Rands, 1975 Working Women's Conference.

[34] Rands, 1975 Working Women's Conference.

majority...finally at the end it turned out that only 11 people actually paid their initiation fees out of a bargaining unit of about 1,200."[35] Overall, on-the-job organizers "found that the professional union leaders assigned to UBC were a hindrance rather than a help."[36] After these experiences, those still desirous of having a union at UBC looked to form their own organization which would be based on feminist principles. Organizers, many of whom had been involved with the Working Women's Association, oriented themselves toward that organization, not established unions, to help them in their quest for a union.[37]

After OTEU's effort failed, AUCE was established with the help of campus-based worker-organizers, the Working Women's Association, and the province's progressive male-led breakaway unions, including Canadian Association of Industrial, Mechanical, and Allied Workers (CAIMAW) and the Pulp, Paper, and Woodworkers' of Canada (PPWC).[38] The Service, Office, and Retail Workers' Union of Canada (SORWUC) was concurrently formed with the intention of organizing women workers outside of universities while AUCE's purview was in the academic sector. Throughout 1972, AUCE's constitution was drafted by worker-organizers and their allies. In October, the volunteer-run effort launched their first organizing drive, which gained 375 members, an impressive number but short of a majority equaled approximately 600.[39] The effort was energetic but disorganized; Rands described AUCE's leadership as signing workers up "frantically all over the university." Unable to gain a majority

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[35] Rands, 1975 Working Women's Conference.

[36] "Does labour unity mean smashing women's unions?" *Kinesis*, October 1980.

[37] Potrebenko, "My Life in SORWUC," 19.

[38] For more on this, see Chapter 5 ""A grievous self-inflicted wound.""

[39] Organizers did not know precisely how many workers would be part of their potential bargaining unit and thus were forced to estimate while organizing.

over the course of three months, which they believed was the time limit for a membership drive, the union decided to call off the first effort.

Though some in the labour movement advised them that winning a second drive was impossible, the organizing committee nonetheless relaunched in August.[40] Strengthened by the experience gained by their prior drive, on-the-job organizers were also aided by the addition of two skilled, energetic, and committed activists. Jackie Ainsworth and Jean Rands were self-directed 'salts,' that is workers who sought out jobs in a workplace with the intent of directly assisting a union drive.[41] The pair were founding members of the Working Women's Association (WWA) and both had been active in the movements for women's rights and against the Vietnam War for several years. Rands had been an activist since her teenage years in the NDP Youth and had run for mayor of Vancouver in 1966.[42] Ainsworth later recalled that "Jean and I were all enthusiastic, let's do this. And the activists were just so tired. It was difficult to get ten people to want to try one more time."[43]

Beyond the new activist energy, the democratic and feminist values held by the organizing committee attracted many to the new drive. AUCE's structure encouraged greater participation and played a major role in bringing in workers to their organizing committee. As historian Francesca Polletta has noted, an emphasis on participatory structures should not only be

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[40] Rands, 1975 Working Women's Conference.

[41] The term 'salting' refers to the process of an individual seeking a job in a specific workplace in order to organize a union. M.D. Lucas. "Salting and other union tactics: A unionist's perspective" *Journal of Labor Research* 18, (1997): 55–64.

[42] In 1966, Jean Rands ran for mayor of Vancouver as a 21-year old independent. Described in *The Province* as a Marxist, she received 6,534 votes out of 87,450 cast. (7.4%) A newspaper described her vote total as "more support than expected" and "a major factor in the outcome." "Campbell gets nod with surprise vote," *The Province*, December 15, 1966, 1

[43] Rod Mickelburgh, host, On the Line: Stories of BC Workers, podcast, episode 6 "AUCE Achieves Full Maternity Benefits 1974," BC Labour Heritage Centre, March 1, 2021.

viewed as prefigurative politics but also as a strategic choice that often strengthens social movement organizing.[44] Sussanne Lester, who had worked at UBC since 1969 and was part of the first two drives, recalled that AUCE's constitution was part of what attracted her to the drive. She said that, unlike other unions, it was designed to "...prevent high paid, unresponsive bureaucracy" as "union officials would be elected with strict term limits and pay limits." During the organizing drive, she emphasized to potential members "that AUCE was a different union. It was committed to democracy, transparency and consensus-based decision making. It was independent and would control its own affairs."[45] This commitment to being different played out in several ways. The effort was run entirely by members in the workplace with the assistance of SORWUC's membership. The union sisters leafletted the UBC campus and staffed AUCE's office, which allowed the thirty-or so core organizing committee members to spend more time signing up their co-workers, primarily before and after work and while on break. To motivate those who had been part of recent failed drives, Ainsworth and Rands suggested a ninety-day limit which, Ainsworth recalled, "helped convince the previous organizers to try ONE MORE TIME!"[46] The new energy of Heather McNeil also proved to be a tremendous boon to their cause. McNeil was one of a number of 'salts'.[47] Without consulting with local organizers, McNeil moved from eastern Canada to British Columbia to help organize the union. She was quickly hired to work in the payroll department in the early days of the fourth drive. In one of her

[44] Francesca Polletta, *Freedom Is An Endless Meeting: Democracy in American Social Movements*, (University of Chicago Press, 2002), 7.

[45] Mickelburgh, 2021.

[46] Jackie Ainsworth, email message to author, December 12, 2024.

[47] McNeil had previously been involved in union organizing in the CLC's Association of Commercial and Technical Employees (ACTE) organizing drive, an effort discussed in detail in Chapter 5. Unlike some salts who were directed to join a feminist union by a political party, McNeil was motivated by the feminist unionist mission of AUCE and eventually became a leading figure within SORWUC.

first days on the job, she was given the task of destroying a copy of the university's payroll list, which included the names and contract information of all non-unionized employees. McNeil had been given the list because her supervisors believed that, as a brand-new employee, she would not be part of the union. Jackie Ainsworth recalled the moment, "I was in the union office at the student union at UBC and this woman came in and said, "I can hardly wait to get involved." Organizers initially suspected McNeil was "a fink" but their suspicions were lowered when she handed over the document.[48] Powered by this lucky turn of events, a participatory culture, and the energy of young, politically conscious radicals, the drive to sign up UBC's clerical and library staff was successful within the 90-day time limit.

In December 1973, AUCE returned 630 signed membership cards to the Labour Relations Board (LRB). Representing 53% of the potential bargaining unit, this put them on the path towards certification. As is often the case with union organizing drives, Local 1 was prevented by management from knowing exactly how many members were part of the potential bargaining unit during the organizing process. Nonetheless, they believed that they had signed up more than half of the potential unit.[49] In the new year, organizers held mass meetings which proved to be a powerful organizing tool. Some had as many as 350 members in attendance, despite taking place outside of working hours. In these meetings, members debated and voted upon contract demands which created buy-in and legitimacy from a wide swath of membership. Emerald Murphy, a founder and Bargaining Committee member, recalled that,

> Every single contract demand that we made in a subject area had been researched and passed by the membership as a contract demand. So it wasn't something that, you know, those of us on the bargaining committee just came up with one day. And every single one of those subjects was debated, in some cases for more than one meeting and in some

[48]Jackie Ainsworth, interview with author, July 8, 2024.

[49] Mickelburgh, 2021.

> cases several meetings before the membership agreed on, this is going to be the contract amount on this subject area.[50]

Though the newly elected NDP provincial government had pledged that it would move swiftly to recognize newly organized unions, Local 1 waited more than three months for the LRB to decide whether to certify the union or mandate a certifying election.[51] The Board eventually ordered a vote in early April and, within a few days, UBC workers went to the polls. However, the LRB once again refused to inform Local 1 as to the size of the bargaining unit or to even post a list of eligible voters in advance, which meant that potential members had to visit a polling place to find out if they were eligible to vote. Moreover, because the government had passed significant labour reform legislation the previous November that would not go into effect until the month after the union had filed its application, Local 1's newsletter reported that "nobody, including the LRB, knows which law we are covered by."[52] The organizing committee was concerned that potential members abstaining would be counted as votes against the union and pressed members to turn out to vote. The involvement of hundreds of potential bargaining unit members made the organizing committee confident that UBC's clerical and library workers would choose AUCE to represent them.[53] The union was organized across the university and stewards were active in every division. Despite the hurdles put in place by the Board and a general sense of confusion, workers showed up to the polls in early April 1974 in huge numbers to support the union; approximately 75% of potential union members voted and the final tally

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[50] Mickelburgh, 2021.

[51] As Alan Artibise describes it the "LRB was granted exclusive, concurrent or supervisory jurisdiction over practically every phase of collective bargaining law within the province" Alan F.J. Artibise, ""A Worthy, if Unlikely, Enterprise:" The Labour Relations Board and the Evolution of Labour Policy and Practice in British Columbia, 1973-1980." *BC Studies* 56 (1982): 11.

[52] "Vote Yes For AUCE," *Across Campus*, April 1, 1974, 2.

[53] Mickelburgh, 2021.

was 820 in favour and 108 against.[54] Mass participation had opened the door for potentially major gains in AUCE's first contract.

Women workers have long been perceived as hesitant to assert their right to strike. However, as Patricia McDermott has written, "not only is it important for [working women] to see themselves in roles in which they confront their employers, it is also critical that they know that a strike can be an exhilarating and transformative experience for those involved."[55] As a union whose membership was over 90 percent women, it was necessary to prove that they were willing to fight for major improvements in their first contract. After beating the odds and winning certification, Local 1 undertook the challenging task of negotiating the first contract. Negotiations with management began in May 1974; however, within just a few weeks, the clerical and support staff workers at UBC were fed up with management's stalling tactics and ready for collective action. On May 25, the Contract Committee cut-off negotiations after the university had offered an insultingly low $35 pay increase to union members. AUCE's members were fed up with being treated like "ladies" working for "pin money" or children.[56] The media was aware that a wildcat strike would likely occur, as exemplified by the *Vancouver Sun* headline which read "UBC workers: Walkout expected."[57] On May 30, 831 members of Local 1 filled a university ballroom to capacity for what was originally planned to be a lunchtime meeting to study the proposed contract. Despite the short notice, over 70 percent of all union

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[54] "New Union Wins Ballot At UBC," *The Vancouver Sun*, April 11, 1974.

[55] Patricia McDermott, "The Eaton's Strike: We Wouldn't Have Missed It for the World!" in *Women Challenging Unions: Feminism, Democracy, and Militancy*, eds. Linda Briskin and Patricia McDermott (University of Toronto Press, 1993), 41-42.

[56] Mickelburgh, 2021.

[57] "UBC WORKERS: Walkout expected," *The Vancouver Sun*, May 30, 1974.

members were in attendance. After the first hour of discussion, a vote was held on whether to extend the session for the remainder of the workday. Through a vote of 660-80, members spent the afternoon reviewing their contract negotiations, an action intended to send a message to their employer which they believed "was labouring under the misconception that the Contract Committee represented no one but themselves, that they were isolated."[58] By striking outside of the legal process, Local 1 intended to prove that the new union was united despite working in the many small office spread out across the expansive campus.[59] Though they called the action a "study session" to ward off potential legal ramifications, Local 1's activities paralyzed most departments on campus. Instead of their typical duties, strikers discussed contract negotiations and their demands "point by point," reaffirming their commitment to pay-equity among other bargaining demands.[60]

In the context of a newly-formed union in a largely non-union industry, the strike not only sent a message to the employer but, as Galbraith wrote, helped to determine "what kind of union we are building."[61] This action showed that AUCE Local 1 was committed to building a new, militant, and democratic union based on uplifting women workers through mass participation. The May 1974 AUCE wildcat strike was transformative for both participants and management. It provided an instant boost of confidence and solidarity with hesitant members while also demonstrating to UBC that this 'women's union' would not easily crack despite typical employer stalling tactics. The strike was part of a protracted negotiation with UBC administrators which necessitated the appointment of an outside mediator. Ultimately, the threat

[58] "831 Study Contract" *Across Campus*, June 4, 1974.

[59] "831 Study Contract" *Across Campus*, June 4, 1974.

[60] "831 Study Contract" *Across Campus*, June 4, 1974.

[61] "831 Study Contract" *Across Campus*, June 4, 1974.

of protracted legal strike during the vitally important student registration period at the beginning of the Fall semester was necessary to win a progressive contract. In total, the union took part in thirty-two bargaining sessions between May and August 1974. As campus newspaper *The Ubyssey* wrote, "UBC library and clerical workers finally won recognition this summer as a campus labor force that won't let sex determine wages."[62] Likely inspired by the impressive gains won by clerical workers and support staff, UBC's faculty association applied to become one of the first legally-recognized faculty unions at a major North American university just days after AUCE members ratified their first contract.[63]

The contract ratified by Local 1 in September 1974 included one of AUCE's most important contributions to the larger labour and women's movements: fully-paid maternity leave. For the first time in Canadian history, a collective bargaining agreement included a provision guaranteeing that mothers would not be subject to financial punishment for pregnancy. The Unemployment Insurance Commission guaranteed all workers seventeen weeks of partial payments after giving birth,. Once they returned to work, the collective agreement mandated that the employer provide a "top up" payment which brought their total compensation for those seventeen weeks to the same amount as they would have earned without giving birth. This was not an accident; as a feminist union with deep roots in the women's liberation movement, AUCE members made winning maternity leave a top priority in negotiations.

As Rosemary Warskett has noted, socialist feminists have fought to broaden notions of working-class struggles to include maternity leave and other forms of social reproduction.[64]

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[62] "Pact leaves sexism out," *The Ubyssey*, September 10, 1974.

[63] Michael Sasages, "UBC profs apply for union," *The Ubyssey*, September 12, 1974.

[64] Rosemary Warskett. "Feminism's Challenge to Unions in the North: Possibilities and Contradictions." *Socialist Register* 37 (2001), 329-342.

While AUCE Local 1 and 2 were innovators in the field of collectively bargained maternity leave, the concept did not begin in Vancouver. As early as 1919, Canada publicly acknowledged the necessity of providing compensation to working mothers as well as medical benefits through their involvement in the International Labour Organization (ILO). However, neither the federal nor provincial governments enacted policies to provide these benefits until 1971. Throughout the post-war era, neither Canada's labour movement nor its largely middle-class women's movement supported extending financial benefits to working mothers.[65] The breakthrough finally occurred following years of reports, commissions, and broad-based women's rights activism. This included socialist feminist NDP MP Grace MacInnis, who sponsored three private member bills for the inclusion of maternity leave as part of Unemployment Insurance (UI) between 1968 and 1970. In 1971, legislation was finally passed by Parliament. These changes expanded the program to include pregnant workers for the first time, though insurance had been provided to working mothers previously on a case-by-case basis.[66] Historian Ann Porter has described expanding UI to include pregnancy as containing major contradictions: These changes "helped establish a new family-market-state relationship in which women were recognized as both workers and mothers." However, by placing the program within the realm of Unemployment Insurance, non-wage-earning mothers were excluded and concerns about pregnant women defrauding the system and abusing benefits were maintained.[67] Nonetheless, it was undoubtedly a major improvement for working people who became pregnant. With the goals of eliminating the penalties faced by working mothers and, more broadly, eliminating inequality for women

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[65] Ann Porter, *Gendered States*: *Women, Unemployment Insurance, and the Political Economy of the Welfare State in Canada, 1945-1997* (University of Toronto Press, 2003), 77-80

[66] Porter, 83.

[67] Porter, 123.

workers, feminist unionists brought 2,500 workers into the labour movement and entire campuses of previously non-unionized clerical and library workers across British Columbia.

Once paid maternity leave was won, the union battled opponents on all sides: first and foremost, university management sought to roll back the provision during subsequent contract negotiations. The federal government, seeking to reduce public sector spending, reinterpreted its' earlier guidance and deemed the payment of maternity benefits illegal. [68] Opposition even came from a minority of union members, who, feeling the impact of austerity, pushed back against "special" provisions which "benefit[ed] only a few." While management was able to water down the provision during years of widespread austerity, the determination of AUCE's membership as a whole to prioritize the specific needs of working mothers allowed it to prevail. After AUCE successfully defended the provision in court, the larger labour movement took notice. Public sector unions across the country, most notably the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW), adopted the provision and the provision became the basis for collective bargaining for maternity leave.

In 1919, the ILO held the first-ever international conference on maternity protection. The subsequent treaty recommended several significant reforms, including provisions requiring the payment of benefits to mothers on leave and the provision of access to free medical care. Though Canada was a founding member of the ILO, it never ratified the conference's findings and did not pass a law incorporating its provisions into law. Instead, the only province to act was British Columbia. In 1921, the BC Legislative Assembly passed the Maternity Protection Act, which incorporated several non-monetary provisions put forth by the ILO into law. It banned women from employment for six weeks following birth while allowing women to leave six weeks prior

[68] "Maternity Money Sought By UIC," *Times Colonist*, August 10, 1978.

to her due date with medical permission. It also banned employers from firing women during these periods.[69] Neither the federal government nor any other province passed a similar law until after World War II.[70] Notably missing were ILO provisions providing access to paid benefits and free healthcare which were already standard practice in other corners of the British Empire such as Australia, England, and New Zealand.[71] As late as 1970, only British Columbia and New Brunswick had laws guaranteeing leave, paid or unpaid, for pregnant mothers. While British Columbia's laws on maternity leave were progressive in the Canadian context, it remained extremely difficult for wage-earning women to receive any income after becoming pregnant and exceedingly rare after giving birth.[72]

Prior to 1971, only ten percent of working women had income during maternity leave, usually obtained from rare provisions within their collective agreement.[73] The few union contracts which had maternity leave provisions typically only applied to workers with one or more years in the company and protected a woman's seniority but provided no income while on leave. One union with a high percentage of women workers directly provided a small financial

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[69] Marion Findlay, "Protection of Workers in Industry" *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 107, Social and Economic Conditions in The Dominion of Canada (May, 1923), 259.

[70] BC's "Maternity Protection Act" included several ILO provisions, including a prohibition on the employment of women for six weeks following childbirth, the right of a pregnant woman to leave work up to 6 weeks prior to the her due date, and the mandate to allow pregnant women thirty-minute periods occurring twice a day to nurse their newborn child. Sheila Woodsworth. "Maternity Protection For Women Workers In Canada," Women's Bureau, Canada Department of Labour, 1967, 11.

[71] The ILO mandated that working mothers "be paid benefits sufficient for the full and healthy maintenance of herself and her child, provided either out of public funds or by means of a system of insurance, the exact amount of which shall be determined by the competent authority in each country, and as an additional benefit shall be entitled to free attendance by a doctor or certified midwife." Maternity Protection Convention, 1919 (No. 3) Convention C003, Maternity Protection Convention, 1919 (No. 3)

[72] "Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women," September 28, 1970, 85-87.

[73] Jane Pulkingham and Tanya Van Der Gaag. "Maternity/parental leave provisions in Canada: We've come a long way, but there's further to go." *Canadian Woman Studies/Les cahiers de la femme* (2004), 116.

benefit to members after giving birth.[74] Though some workplaces, both unionized and non-unionized, provided a limited amount of financial assistance to pregnant and postnatal women, the most common result of pregnancy was financial hardship. During pregnancy, it was commonplace for women workers to resign, often under duress, or be fired once the pregnancy became known.[75] Socialist feminists in the women's movement, including those who organized Local 1 and drafted their contract's key demands, sought to end the 'pregnancy penalty' and guarantee women the right to motherhood and work if she so chose.

To begin to rectify this, pressure from women's groups, both social democratic and liberal, grew throughout the 1960s. In response, the Liberal government of Lester B. Pearson established the Royal Commission on the Status of Women (RCSW) in 1967. Its report, published in 1970, made policy recommendations.[76] It noted that in November 1967, Canada had accepted the principles of the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (DEDAW). Article 10-2. This treaty declared that "paid maternity leave with the guarantee of returning to former employment" was necessary "in order to prevent discrimination against women on account of marriage or maternity."[77] In their 1968 submission, the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) described the country's maternity leave policies as "woefully inadequate." To rectify this, the CLC echoed the earlier ILO treaty and urged the payment of cash benefits to working mothers equal to 100% of her previous earnings as well as

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[74] The union in question was cited but not named by the Women's Bureau. Sheila Woodsworth. "Maternity Protection For Women Workers In Canada," 27.

[75] Maternity Benefits and Unemployment Insurance: A Question of Policy Design

[76] Barbara Cameron and Meg Luxton eds. *Feminism's Fight: Challenging Politics and Policies In Canada Since 1970*. (UBC Press, 2023).

[77] "Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women," Government of Canada, September 28, 1970, 85.

full medical and dental benefits. Moreover, it declared that "a woman should suffer no loss in her seniority rights relative to other employees, whether male or female" and that "to some our recommendations may seem utopian but for many women...it is vitally necessary to provide for...the full and healthy maintenance of herself and her child in accordance with a suitable standard of living."[78] Pressure on the national government created space for socialist feminist Grace MacInnis, an NDP Member of Parliament representing Vancouver Kingsway, to introduce a private member bill to expand Unemployment Insurance (UI). However, the bill was undermined by provisions which sought to ensure women were already working in their current workplace prior to conception. This limitation impacted on the ability of many working-class mothers to gain access to UI benefits. Socialist feminists recognized that working women needed to push harder for maternity benefits and those involved in the Working Women's Association pursued it through collective bargaining and direct action.

Mass participation in Local 1 was a decisive factor in winning major improvements, including maternity leave. The union held membership-wide meetings to debate and vote upon the key demands which would later be brought to management. In one such meeting in April 1974, members ratified a proposal which demanded a $250 monthly across-the-board increase. They sought to ensure that members "earn a wage more comparable to the B.C. average wage" and "that our skills and value to the university are recognized monetarily and to eradicate the wage discrimination between "male" and "female" job categories."[79] On the evening of May 1,

[78] Submission by the Canadian Labour Congress to the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada, October 1, 1968, 20-22.

[79] "Contract Proposal to be voted on April 18th membership meeting Graduate Student Center Ballroom 5:15 "WAGES!!," April 1974, *Association of University and College Employees fonds*, University of British Columbia Library Rare Books and Special Collections.

members ratified a bargaining proposal which would provide for two weeks of paid paternity leave as well as paid maternity provisions: Local 1 demanded that

> No employee should lose her job or seniority in case of pregnancy. She should collect the benefits of the Maternities Provision of the Unemployment Act plus the difference of these benefits and her monthly salary from the University upon return to work.[80]

This kind of mass involvement and collective decision-making gave the union a significant advantage at the bargaining table. One of the union negotiators, Emerald Murphy, later recalled in an oral history interview, "we really ran that university into the ground in terms of bargaining. They were unprepared; they didn't put anything on the table, so we ran with it."[81] Jackie Ainsworth described UBC's administration as being caught "totally off-guard; they were stunned" by AUCE's proposals.[82] Whereas UBC had offered a $35 raise prior to the May 30 wildcat strike, Local 1 rejected a $160 across-the-board increase in July.[83] Ultimately, the university agreed to most of AUCE's demands, including a $225 across-the-board increase. This increased monthly pay for the lowest paid workers by 64%, from $408 to $633. The agreement also reduced working hours from 36.5 to 35 per week.[84] While the university refused to concede on the issue of paternity leave, the maternity leave provisions was virtually identical to the demand passed by membership:

> In case of pregnancy, a continuing and sessional employee shall not lose seniority entitlements. She shall receive the benefits of the Maternity Provision of the Unemployment Insurance Act. Upon return to work, the employee shall be reinstated in

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[80] "Minutes of the Special Membership Meeting," May 1, 1974. Box 5, File 10, *Association of University and College Employees fonds*, University of British Columbia Library Rare Books and Special Collections.

[81] "UBC Clerical and Library Workers: Lead the Way for Maternity Benefits"

[82] "UBC Clerical and Library Workers: Lead the Way for Maternity Benefits"

[83] "University union makes new offer," *The Vancouver Sun*, July 23, 1974.

[84] "UBC Employees Vote," *The Province*, August 30, 1974.

> her former position and the employer shall pay the difference of the benefits received and the employee's monthly salary.[85]

Significant improvements were won by all of the first contracts negotiated by AUCE locals. At Notre Dame University in rural Nelson, British Columbia, Local 3's first contract was signed in November 1974. It won, among other improvements, a $150 per month across the board increase. This raised the base monthly pay for the lowest paid workers from $256 to $406, a 63% increase. Local 3 did not, however, win maternity leave.[86] AUCE Local 2 at Simon Fraser University's path to winning maternity leave was more difficult due to internal disagreements. Writing shortly after they signed their first contract, union member Honorée Newcombe recalled that "some of the men on the negotiating team actually regarded an extended maternity leave as a trade-off clause, something that could be exchanged for a more worthwhile concession." This led to a "violent argument" between negotiating team members, though those dedicated to winning maternity leave prevailed. SFU later conceded and a similar provision was included in Local 2's contract as had been won by Local 1. In retrospect, Newcombe took encouragement "from the fact that no intentional malice was involved, but simply a lack of basic understanding of the special problems of working women."[87]

Contract negotiations between 1976 and1977 took place during a period of austerity. UBC again sought to roll back many of the progressive provisions won in the earlier contract, including maternity benefits. Initial negotiations included a proposal that paid maternity leave would "only [be earned by] full-time continuing employees who have worked for over a year" at

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[85] "UBC Clerical and Library Workers: Lead the Way for Maternity Benefits" BC Labour Heritage Centre.

[86] "NDU CONTRACT SIGNED," *Across Campus*, November 7, 1974, Vol 2, Issue 15

[87] Honorée Newcombe, "Coming Up From Down Under: A Hopeful History of AUCE," in *AUCE & TSSU: Memoirs of a Feminist Union, 1972–1993* (Teaching Support Staff Union Publishing, 1994), 11.

UBC. The university also sought the power to not guarantee a working mother her previous job following leave, and to grant themselves sole discretion to determine "whether maternity leave will be extended without pay."[88] While Local 1 strongly objected to these proposed changes, even worse news soon came from an unexpected source: the federal Unemployment Insurance Commission (UIC). In January 1977, it informed UBC that AUCE's maternity leave provision was illegal according to their interpretation of the Unemployment Insurance Act.[89] AUCE had received verbal assurances from the UIC when it first negotiated for maternity leave in 1974 that it did not violate the law. However, the UIC reinterpreted the provision, possibly under political pressure to reduce federal spending in the new era of austerity. The reinterpretation put not only the future of paid maternity leave in collective agreements in doubt but also threatened to force all of the working mothers who were beneficiaries since 1974 to pay back past payments.

Faced with legal uncertainty, looming budgetary austerity, and a seeming ideological opposition to the concept, some members looked to negotiate away maternity leave to "ask for a benefit that we all can use." The February 1977 edition of *Across Campus* included a resolution sponsored by two women suggesting it was unfair to "ask the University to totally subsidize us while we take the decision to have a family" because in "these enlightened times it is rare that we don't have a choice in these matters." The resolution then suggested instead, "that perhaps we could trade off maternity leave (as it benefits only a few)" for better health and dental benefits.[90] In response, another member mocked the counterproposal, writing that "the "benefits only a few" phrase disturbed her. Perhaps, then, we could "trade off" Article 30.02 Compassionate Leave (as

[88] *Across Campus*, October 4, 1976

[89] *Across Campus*, March 4, 1977. 5-6

[90] *Across Campus,* February 28, 1977

it benefits only a few) and instead ask for a benefit that we all can use, such as a holiday on our birthday, or an afternoon a month to contemplate life."[91] However, despite this internal opposition, Local 1 voted again to prioritize maternity leave at full pay.[92] Later that year, AUCE's provincial convention also endorsed the continued struggle for better maternity and child care benefits.

The back-and-forth with the UIC continued throughout 1977. After multiple unanswered letters seeking an explanation, the UIC sent demand letters to all recipients of maternity benefits seeking immediate repayment. The union appealed the UIC's ruling but lost a tribunal hearing. In August 1978, the *Times Colonist* wrote that the UIC sought up to $80,000 from approximately 60 working mothers, or about $1,200 to $2,000 per person. Commissioners "threatened to lay fraud charges and get collective agencies to try to recover the money." UBC library assistant and single mother Judy Hawkins argued that the UIC's appeals board, known as the Board of Referees, which was made up of 3 older men, initially declined the union's appeal "on the basis of their own prejudices about working mothers rather than on its merits."[93] SORUWC had negotiated a similar clause into contracts at three institutions which were also threatened by the case.[94] However, after much delay, in March 1979, a federal court justice ruled that the provisions for maternity leave were legal after all. This major decision encouraged other unions, such as the British Columbia Government Employees' Union (BCGEU), to seek similar

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[91] "Opinions, Etc," *Across Campus*, April 7, 1977, 25.

[92] "Minutes of Special Membership Meeting Of 3 March 1977 - IRC 2," *Across Campus*, April 7, 1977, 12-17.

[93] "Maternity Money Sought By UIC," *Times Colonist*, August 10, 1978.

[94] "SORWUC members at the Student Society, Electrical Trades Credit Union and Volunteer Grandparents may lose a similar clause in their contract if AUCE's appeal fails. So far no SORWUC member has benefitted from the clause." "Trouble with Maternity Leave," *S.O.R.W.U.C. News*, Summer 1978, 9.

provisions in their contracts. BCGEU's organizing director, Cliff Andstein, called the decision "very significant," adding that it set a standard for the private sector as well as public.[95] Another independent public sector union with a majority of female members, the Hospital Employees' Union (HEU), also sought copies of Local 1 and 2's collective agreements in order to pattern their own demands moving forward.[96] While the provisions were deemed legal and a new precedent was set, that alone did not necessarily guarantee the benefits would continue unchallenged by management.

Despite AUCE's successful defense of its groundbreaking provision, maternity leave was still a contested part of Local 1's contract. UBC's management stepped up pressure during the 1978 contract negotiations during a period of declining union morale. This combination led Local 1 to sign their third contract in 1978 which included a concession to the university on maternity leave. Whereas the previous contracts had mandated the immediate payment of benefits, this and future contracts mandated that the employee return to work for six months following maternity leave before the maternity "top-up" would be paid. The intent of this change was for the university to ensure a working mother did not quit or otherwise leave once the benefit was paid. [97] It was already well-known within the union that UBC regularly took months to pay benefits, which also had the effect of informally keeping working mothers in their positions. One member reported that "a woman in the Serials Division of the Main Library

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[95] "UIC, Maternity Incentive Allowed," *Times Colonist*, March 17, 1979.

[96] The Hospital Employees' Union had previously been part of CUPE from 1963 to 1970. Sharon Yandle, "Re: Maternity Benefits Articles in AUCE Contracts," July 18, 1979, Box 17, File 10. Association of University and College Employees fonds, University of British Columbia Library Rare Books and Special Collections.

[97] As a concession to the Union, the contract removed the earlier provision that had made the Union responsible for repayment of a member's benefits should she resign or be fired for just cause. Association of University of College Employees, Local 1. "Association of University & College Employees, Local 1 (UBC) Union Contract. April 1, 1978- March 31, 1978," Box 26, File 15, Association of University and College Employees fonds, University of British Columbia Library Rare Books and Special Collections.

applied for her Maternity Benefits on the day she returned to work from Maternity Leave. Three months later, she received her cheque."[98]

Continued pressure from the women's movement, sections of organized labour, and the sheer demographic increase in the number of working women giving birth added increased pressure on Canadian society for paid maternity leave. The Canadian Human Rights Commission was formed in 1977 and, in 1979, it investigated existing maternity leave provisions. In that year, a report urged the elimination of restrictions around hours worked prior to conception as well as the inclusion of adopted parents.[99] In 1981, the British Columbia Federation of Labour (BCFL) proposed what some deemed a "utopian" law which was based on Sweden's Parental Insurance Law. When discussing the legislation, *The Vancouver Sun* newspaper cited AUCE's "unusual" contract provisions as one of the "far more innovative and wide-ranging" policies which went beyond the legal minimum.[100] CUPW's 1981 contract negotiations made winning maternity leave a top priority, which baffled many in both the public and the labour movement. CUPW president Jean-Claude Parrot later recalled "I still remember when folks used to call and say "Jean-Claude, are we really on strike only over paid maternity leave?" and my answer was always "No, there are other issues, but we're not going back in until we get it. And then they would say, "Ok, we understand."[101] As late as 1981, only 8% of union contracts had any kind of maternity leave provision. Nonetheless, CUPW echoed AUCE's maternity leave and demanded

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[98] "Personal Comment," *Across Campus*, November 14, 1977.

[99] Leslie A. Pal, "Maternity Benefits and Unemployment Insurance: A Question of Policy Design," Canadian Public Policy / Analyse de Politiques , Sep., 1985, Vol. 11, No. 3 (September., 1985), 557.

[100] "Swedish parental law utopia?" *The Vancouver Sun*, April 10, 1981.

[101] "A Struggle to Remember Fighting for our Families," Past Perfect Productions, 6:35-6:47 (The original comment is in French, the translation is taken from the documentary in the subtitles.) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=INzLJiZ2yaQ&t=18s&ab_channel=IBEWLocalUnion424

twenty weeks of 100% paid maternity leave, with the employer paying 100% for two weeks prior to giving birth and 3 weeks after birth while also "topping up" UI benefits for 15 total weeks. CUPW's leadership built an alliance with 500 women's groups, including non-profits and fellow labour unions, which supported CUPW throughout the fight. These groups joined CUPW on the picket line, spoke at press conferences, and generally added the energy of a social movement to the strike. Postal workers went on strike beginning on June 29, 1981. In July, CUPW informed Local 1 that UBC was engaging in strike-breaking activity by diverting mail to the United States Postal Service. In response, Local 1 organizer Carole Cameron quickly sent a letter to UBC management which demanded it end the mail diversion.[102] At the same time, the *Vancouver Sun* again cited AUCE's contract as one of the rare examples of a Canadian union which had successfully negotiated maternity leave provisions.[103] On August 12, 1981, CUPW members returned to work with the first national contract in Canada which included 17 weeks of fully paid maternity leave. The provisions closely mirrored the "top-up" clauses first won by AUCE at UBC and SFU seven years prior.[104] AUCE's wins at UBC and SFU were powered by membership engagement and a strong political vision, which enabled them to set the stage for bigger wins for workers across the labour movement and eventually Canada as a whole. However, as the global economy shifted, management frequently blamed unions for tough economic times. Anti-unionism called into question AUCE's ability to maintain its women's liberationist perspective and organizational independence.

Merger

[102] "Letters," *Across Campus*, August 1981, 9-10

[103] "Motherhood Becomes Issue," *The Vancouver Sun*, July 11, 1981.

[104] Leslie J. Nichols, "Alliance Building To Create Change: The Women's Movement and the 1982 CUPW Strike," *Just Labour: A Canadian Journal of Work and Society* 19 (Autumn 2012).

Local 1's first declared strike demonstrated that university students could not always be counted on to be allies of academic workers. Shifting attitudes on the UBC campus reflected changes society-wide. AUCE Local 1 went on strike in November 1975, and strikers received a mixture of support and harassment from UBC's student population. Many students were angered by the timing of the work stoppage, which coincided with end of semester exams. Campus RCMP officers acknowledged the harassment of picketers by students, which included spraying picketers with water while driving past them, but the RCMP did not take action because "nobody's really been hurt."[105] Jay Hirabayashi, a religious studies graduate student, wrote in the UBC newspaper after the strike's conclusion that "on [the] Association of University and College Employees picket lines[,] I was splashed, buzzed by speeding cars, sworn at or just ignored. That's how an 'educated' public greets a worker's picket line. It turns my stomach."[106] Strike supporters among the undergraduate student population were harassed by their peers; The president of a student residence was forced to resign because of his time on the picket lines.[107] Future NDP MP Svend Robinson, then an undergraduate student representative on UBC's board of governors, resigned over his "extreme dissatisfaction" with the university's negotiating team.[108] While Local 1 was on strike, the NDP was easily defeated by the fiscally conservative Social Credit Party in the provincial election.[109] These two events, the growth of anti-AUCE

[105] "UBC strikers determined to get equality," *The Vancouver Sun*, December 6, 1975.

[106] Jay Hirabayashi, "Pickets ignored," *The Ubyssey*, January 8, 1976, 4.

[107] Ralph Maurer, "Robinson quits board over AUCE treatment," *The Ubyssey*, January 8, 1976, 2.

[108] According to a biography of Robinson, he not only attended a rally in support of Local 1 but "released a confidential memo concerning the administration's plans to break the strike" before resigning. Robinson faced major consequences for his decision to back AUCE and break UBC's confidentiality agreement. Following the release of the memo and his resignation, a prominent law firm withdrew a job offer, citing his "untrustworthiness." Graeme Truelove, *Svend Robinson: A Life in Politics* (New Star Books, 2013) 24.

[109] Jes Odam,"Social Credit back under Bill Bennett," The Vancouver Sun, 1.

attitudes among UBC students and the return of fiscal conservatism to government, portended future struggles despite the impressive gains previously won.

Throughout the latter years of the 1970s and onward, governments around the world, including British Columbia, disinvested in the public sector and attacked the rights of workers, including strict limits on the right to strike.[110] In 1979, the RCMP broke up a picket line at Simon Fraser University, leading to the arrest of eighteen strikers. The provincial labour movement responded unequivocally in condemning the arrests.[111] Given the threat to trade unionism in general, the long-running debate regarding AUCE's potential affiliation with a larger body increased during this period.

Affiliation supporters argued that women had made major gains within the Canadian Labour Congress and that AUCE and SORWUC would be better able to support the unorganized masses of working women from within labour's mainstream.

> We do not underestimate the determination of our members to struggle. But we do question whether we have the *resources* to defend ourselves against the attacks that lie ahead...We want the gains of AUCE defended while joining the Canadian Labour Congress.[112]

Proponents of feminist independent unions, including the founders of SORWUC and AUCE, touted their successes, questioned whether gains made by clerical workers within CUPE had been made, and the motives of those leading the movement for affiliation:

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[110] Leo Panitch and Donald Swartz, *From Consent to Coercion*: *The Assault on Trade Union Freedoms* Third Edition, (Garamond Press, 2003).

[111]Association of University of College Employees, Local 1. "DROP ALL CHARGES: DEFEND THE SFU 18. DEFEND THE RIGHT TO STRIKE" Pamphlet, October 26, 1979. Box 7, Folder 23, Association of University and College Employees fonds, University of British Columbia Library Rare Books and Special Collections.

[112] Carol Knight, Joan Meister, Sara Diamond, and Michele Preston "Moving Out: an open letter to feminists and trade unionists," *Kinesis*, August 1980, 6-7.

> If they thought it was important for working people to control their own unions, they would not be prepared to sacrifice a very rare example of a union democratically controlled by clerical workers. They care about organizing opposition caucuses, getting themselves elected to conventions so they can debate and hobnob with trade union celebrities. To these people, the real function of unionism - collective bargaining - is mere "economism", not worthy of the attention of people who concern themselves with global political strategies.[113]

Discussions among feminist trade unionists in BC were heated on the issue and no consensus could be reached on the affiliation question. In the meantime, opponents of both unions and the women's movement launched "a direct attack on labour and social rights and welfare-related services."[114] The governing BC Social Credit Party introduced legislation to roll back the rights of workers, tenants, public aid recipients, and other marginalized groups. In response, Operation Solidarity, a united front including labour and other social movements, was soon declared. This full-frontal assault on labour rights reflected how labour relations in Canada, British Columbia, and worldwide had changed since AUCE's formation a decade prior. Though mass protests and other actions organized by Operation Solidarity were able to curtail some of the legislation, the climate continued to be harsh for all unions in its aftermath.

Faced with the difficult conditions, AUCE Local 1 finally affiliated with the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) in December 1984. This led to several sizable shifts in union governance. Local 1 only considered merging with CLC affiliates because "the majority of the Committee feel that such affiliation [with the CLC] is paramount, and in fact a large part of the purpose of this whole exercise [affiliation]."[115] Concerns within the Merger Committee were

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[113] Jackie Ainsworth, Sheila Perret, and Jean Rands, "AUCE affiliation: sacrificing union democracy," LEFTWORDS, September 1980. volume 2, no. 5, 11.

[114] Bryan D. Palmer, *Solidarity: The Rise & Fall of an Opposition in British Columbia* (New Star Books, 1987), 21.

[115] Association of University of College Employees, Local 1. "Merger Committee Final Report," December 13, 1984, Box 19, File 11, *Association of University and College Employees fonds*, University of British Columbia Library Rare Books and Special Collections.

largely based on questions of finances and autonomy, though a section of the union remained in favour of continued independence. Members questioned other union representatives and each other on whether they could afford to pay the dues increase necessary to support CUPE's provincial and national bodies while maintaining local autonomy. Some also expressed the belief that “staff representatives and lawyers provided by the CUPE national and provincial offices would not be particularly sensitive to the special needs of our membership."[116]

CUPE promised to provide access to professional research and training services which were unavailable to independent unions. Merging into CUPE also meant joining the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC). CUPE was very familiar with the process of union absorptions, as it was among the leaders in that category among all Canadian unions in the 1970s and 1980s. Absorptions as a whole were a common strategy for smaller unions during the difficult period starting in the late 1970s and continuing into the 1990s.[117]A key factor in CUPE's favour was its offer of a service trial period which gave Local 1 the right to leave the union after two years if they were unhappy with the arrangement. Wettig wrote that "The willingness of CUPE to offer us a two-year service trial period went a long way to persuading us." Going even further, CUPE cut Local 1's financial commitment to CUPE by $35,000 in the first year. This allowed the former independent to avoid outspending its revenue in year 1. During the merger discussion, AUCE stalwart Shirley Irvine expressed concerns about merging into CUPE, "The main drawback is financial. We would be required to pay a per capita tax of $11.25 per month to support the national structure. Our monthly dues would therefore have to be increased by $11.25

[116] Only AUCE Local 6, which represented non-faculty teaching and support staff at Simon Fraser University, remained independent. TSSU continues to be independent and feminist to the present day. See: Alicia Massie and Yi Chien Jade Ho. "“Working Women Unite”: Exploring a Socialist Feminist, Nonhierarchical Teachers Union." *Labor Studies Journal* 45, no. 1 (2020): 32-55.

[117] Gary N. Chaison “Union Mergers In Hard Times: The View From Five Countries” *ILR Press / Cornell University Press*, 1996, 58-59.

per month to maintain services to our membership at the present level. The only other alternative is a drastic cut in services at the local level."[118]

The final vote on affiliation occurred at a special membership meeting in December 1984 which was attended by CUPE national president Jeff Rose. Rose emphasized in his address that "CUPE is not big on rhetoric vis a vis trade unionism..." Instead of an “old style militant trade union stereotype,” Rose urged AUCE members "to view CUPE as a major insurance policy." While arguing that "an independent group simply can not take on the government by themselves," Rose acknowledged AUCE's legacy of independence and strong commitment to self-governance, stating that "local autonomy and democracy" were "a cornerstone of the CUPE structure." Reflecting the local's shift away from their origins in the women's liberation movement, the staff representative assigned by CUPE would likely be male. Indeed, all four invited guest speakers were also male. Thus, AUCE’s transition from an alternative union militantly dedicated to women’s liberation and participatory democracy to a progressive union within the mainstream has not lessened the impact of its fights for maternity leave and across-the-board wage increases, and participatory democracy on organized labour and society more broadly. AUCE was imagined by its socialist-feminist organizers in the early 1970s as the first of many unions organized and governed by working women. While the scale did not match their ambitious dream, AUCE Local 1 made an outsized impact on the lives of all working women through its pioneering bargaining of fully-paid maternity leave in all of its collective bargaining agreements.

[118] Association of University of College Employees, Local 1. "Merger Committee Final Report," December 13, 1984, Box 19, File 11, *Association of University and College Employees fonds*, University of British Columbia Library Rare Books and Special Collections.

Chapter 2

"Angry, unrepresented workers" and the struggle for socialist feminism at the University of Washington

> The founding of United Workers Union-Independent is not the first time that angry, unrepresented workers have organized into an independent union. And it won't be the last. For new unionism is constantly revitalizing the old. And that is what independent unions are in this period of history -- a new unionism whose eventual aim is to unify and strengthen the whole labor movement. - Monica Hill, November 1975[1]

In September 1973, Monica Hill sat at her desk in Padelford Hall on the University of Washington campus feeling outraged. While opening the mail, she had discovered a notice of changes to the classification system which governed her pay and that of the 14,000 other university support staff across the system. These changes were intended to standardize pay across university campuses and streamline the system of university labour relations. However, they also meant that many already low-paid workers, mostly women and minorities, were going to receive the same or less pay under the new system. Faced with this knowledge, Hill chose to fight back.[2] Though, she had not previously been involved in a social movement she nonetheless decided to put the leadership skills which she developed while class president at her high school in Spokane and the social connections she made with co-workers into action; Hill recalled "that night I walked around the building, found out what was happening to other people, wrote a two-page expose, distributed six copies and called a meeting. One hundred people showed up to that

[1] Monica Hill, *Why Independent Unions?* Radical Women Publications: 1975.

[2] Hill was 30 years old at the time and was well-educated for her position. She grew up in an Irish American family in conservative Spokane, Washington. She earned a bachelor's degree in history and literature from Seattle University and traveled widely after graduation, including time spent studying Arabic in the Middle East. Prior to this effort, she already considered herself a feminist and opponent of the Vietnam War but had no previous organizing experience. (Monica Hill, interviewed by Thomas MacMillan, July 9, 2024).

meeting!"[3] Present at this meeting was Yolanda (Abeyta) Alaniz, an office assistant in the Arts and Science department Student Advising Office in Padelford Hall. She had been a key leader in the Chicana/o student movement at the UW and had a long relationship with United Farm Workers union activities and MEChA (a Chicana/o student organization). She recalls Hill explaining the inherent sexism and racism of the reclassification system. Alaniz remembers her astonishment that so many white people cared about racial minorities who worked on campus.[4] News spread quickly around the highly politicized UW campus and a cross-section of workers and students were in attendance. Danks recalls that the meeting was led by three women, one of them being Monica Hill.[5] Alongside electing Hill as coordinator, a twelve-member steering committee was also quickly chosen. The Staff Rights Organization Committee (SROC), guided by area radicals, was a single-issue organization which was able to mobilize thousands of community members in rapid order. Within just a few weeks' time, the protest movement spread beyond the university campus and into greater Seattle.

During the autumn months of 1973, the group organized petitions, led marches, held rallies both on campus and at the state capitol in Olympia which drew thousands of attendees. Affirmative Action was a key factor. However, SROC quickly discovered that they were not only opposing the Washington Legislature but also the state's largest public sector union, the Washington Federation of State Employees (WFSE). When SROC went on strike against the proposed changes, the AFSCME affiliate refused to honour their picket lines. Ultimately, the reclassification system went into effect on January 1, and the strike ended the following day.

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[3] Monica Hill, "Union Women's Alliance to Gain Equality (Union Wage) 1975 Working Women's Conference" Labor Archives and Research Center, November 8, 1975. http://archive.org/details/csfst_000041

[44] Yolanda (Abeyta) Alaniz: MEChA de UW, Radical Women, Freedom Socialist Party - Seattle Civil Rights and Labor History Project https://depts.washington.edu/civilr/alaniz.htm

[5] Lois Danks, interviewed by Thomas MacMillan, July 10, 2024.

Having experienced a lack of solidarity from official organized labour, the group re-organized itself as an independent union known as the United Workers Union-Independent (UWU-I) in early 1974 and successfully fought for the return to work for all strikers without penalty.

Because it operated outside of the "House of Labour," the National Labor Relations Board system, and the Washington Public Employee Relations System, United Workers was able to operate differently than a typical trade union. Rather than representing a specific bargaining unit and negotiating contracts, UWU-I's singular focus was on advancing the interests of the lowest paid and worst treated employees on the University of Washington campus, particularly those working in food service, janitorial staff, and clerical staff. Some of these workers were members of established unions, while many were otherwise unrepresented. UWU-I was the first union on campus to call for UW funding of childcare for students and workers as part of affirmative action. United Workers spent most of its time representing its own members, the majority of whom were themselves low-paid women and minorities, in grievances against the university. More broadly, they fought to improve the conditions of all low-paid workers on campus. The group was a frequent critic of the leadership of established unions, which they derided as conservative and undemocratic. The union encouraged dual membership with established unions, and they directly intervened in them, challenging them to better support women and minority workers. A major part of what made UWU-I unique was the influence of Radical Women (RW), an autonomous socialist feminist organization dedicated to building women's leadership and voices. RW was a recognized campus organization. The Freedom Socialist Party (FSP) is a sister organization of Radical Women (RW). FSP is a Trotskyist party founded in 1966 which developed a unique ideological synthesis of socialist feminism and

Trotskyism.[6] Because of this influence, the union put an emphasis on having a highly democratic internal structure while practicing a form of democratic centralism, or "full solidarity in carrying out the union's business," outside of the organization.

This chapter examines the Staff Rights Organizing Committee and its successor, the United Workers Union-Independent. Active from 1973-1981, UWU-I was a small union which emphasized a radical vision of affirmative action, which they understood to mean "better wages, equal pay for equal work, job training, career advancement, childcare, upward mobility." in defending the rights of marginalized workers at the University of Washington in Seattle. Existing literature on these labour organizations is scant for several reasons, with their small size and geographic specificity being the foremost reasons. UWU-I was an alternative union which sat outside of the mainstream labour movement. It was an atypical union in both content and structure; the open structure and fixed ideology utilized by SROC and UWU-I are part of what makes these groups unique. SROC and UWU-I were part of the "militant minority" that scholars since Karl Marx have seen as key to the formation of a working class which fights for its own self-interests.[7] This was due to their close ties to the Freedom Socialist Party and Radical Women. SROC and UWU-I were also on the cutting edge of the Comparable Worth Movement which seeks to eliminate wage discrimination by paying workers whose positions, training, and education levels are the same, regardless of their job title, race, or gender. SROC's movement-based organizing exemplifies the differences between the New Left wing of organized labour,

[6] Freedom Socialist Party and Radical Women members also helped organize several other independent unions like UWU-I, including the Staff Association of Pierce County Library, a union which represented 90 employees in the Pierce County, Washington library system. This union was organized by Tamara Turner, a librarian and pioneering gay rights activist. "Tamara Turner papers, 1931-2014," *Archives West*, accessed September 24, 2025. https://archiveswest.orbiscascade.org/ark:80444/xv369201

[7] Benjamin Isitt. *Militant Minority: British Columbia Workers and the Rise of a New Left, 1948-1972*. (University of Toronto Press, 2011).

which was distrustful of established processes and politicians, and the liberal labour establishment, which believed that government would act on behalf of organized people given enough persuasion. Confrontations and denouncements of established organized labour for ignoring the needs of women and low-income minority workers pushed them toward embracing affirmative action. This study suggests that, as the decade continued and Washington's state government refused to take serious measures to eliminate sexual discrimination in the public sector, UWU-I and the liberal union establishment found themselves increasingly on the same side of major policies.

Historian and women's movement activist Barbara Winslow describes the Freedom Socialist Party as having "played the most decisive role in the early formation of the [Seattle] radical women's liberation movement."[8] While the root of worker protest at the University of Washington was based in the prevailing conditions and intense politicization of that particular community, the organization which sprang forth was highly influenced by the Freedom Socialist Party (FSP). FSP is a Trotskyist party which has its origins in the political trajectory of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and the global Trotskyist movement. The SWP was the preeminent Trotskyist party in the United States beginning in the 1930s. Amidst the crackdown on communist and socialist individuals and groups following the end of World War II, the SWP permitted its locals increased levels of autonomy. According to SWP member Barry Sheppard's memoir, "The idea was to hold as much of the cadre together until more propitious times came along."[9] One result of this was the development of significant differences between the national

[8] Barbara Winslow, *Revolutionary Feminists: The Women's Liberation Movement in Seattle*, (Duke University Press, 2023), 31.

[9] Barry Sheppard, *The Socialist Workers Party 1960-1988: Volume 1: The Sixties A Political Memoir* (Resistance Books, 2005), 104.

organization and several party branches, perhaps none more so than the Seattle branch. Starting in 1957, the Kirk-Kaye tendency was formalized.[10] Named for the movement pseudonyms of Clara and Richard Fraser, this grouping internally critiqued various SWP positions, including its support for Black nationalism. In a 1966 pamphlet published by FSP, former Kirk-Kaye tendency members explained that they left the SWP to advocate for "revolutionary integrationism" which is an approach to racism rooted in class conflict.[11] They also believed that the internal culture of the SWP would no longer allow them to put forth alternative political positions. The tendency held a variety of other positions which were opposed to the prevailing opinion within the SWP, including support for increased relations with the People's Republic of China, for an approach to the anti-Vietnam War movement which emphasized "independent anti-capitalist politics that connect the war to the other evils of the system" rather than the SWP's "Negotiations Now" position, and the placing of "the struggle for women's emancipation on the level of a first-class theoretical and programmatic question."[12] Eventually, these internal differences and the re-centralization of authority within the national leadership led to an outright split, which in turn led to the Freedom Socialist Party's formation in 1966.

The Freedom Socialist Party (FSP) was founded in 1966 after the Seattle branch of the SWP and its youth affiliate, the Young Socialist Alliance, resigned. Having around 20-25 members at the beginning, it also included independent radicals and Marxist members of

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[10] Sheppard, 104.

[11] FSP's belief that African American working-class leadership was essential to achieving a U.S. revolution later led to the creation of another unique formation on the U.S. Left: the FSP and RW's joint Comrades of Color Caucus, which was formed to provide "leadership, correction, analysis and proposals… on issues of people of color." https://socialism.com/national-comrades-color-caucus/

[12] Richard Fraser et al. "*Why We Left the Socialist Workers Party*" 1966, *Encyclopedia of Trotskyism On-Line 2006/Prometheus Research Library.*

Students for a Democratic Society.[13] Though the group came out of the tradition of Russian revolutionary leader Leon Trotsky, it broke from established Old Left traditions in a number of keyways. These positions included its early embrace of queer liberation, its criticism of the socialist movement for ignoring and perpetuating the secondary status of women, and its willingness to move outside of established unions to engage with independent formations. One early organizing effort occurred when FSP helped build a short-lived independent union for workers employed by Great Society anti-poverty programs. In the summer of 1969, Gloria Martin helped organize Planned Action Progress for Specialists (PAPS) which won improved working conditions and training for those employed by the Great Society programs in Seattle.[14] While little else is known about this union outside of FSP documents, it indicates an acknowledgement on the part of the party that independent unions could be a useful avenue when fighting for improved conditions for workers outside of the typical male-centric Fordist model. On the question of organized labour, it was deeply critical of labour bureaucracy, arguing that "the bulk of the low-paid, female, and minority sector of the labor force has virtually nowhere to turn except to independent unions that will respect its integrity and special needs."[15] To this end, FSP and its affiliate called Radical Women were very active in aiding independent labour organizing at the University of Washington.

FSP members worked closely with other Seattle radicals to kick start the formation of a women's liberation organization in that city. In October 1967, Susan Stern began hosting meetings at her home in the University District. At the time, Stern was a Students for a

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[13] "Announcing: A New Party...What Is The FSP?" *The Freedom Socialist*, August 5, 1966 (Vol. 1, No. 1)

[14] Martin, *Socialist Feminism*, 7.

[15] "The House of Labor" *The Freedom Socialist*, Summer 1978, Vol. 2, No. 4.

Democratic Society (SDS) member who was similarly frustrated by that group's male chauvinism. She organized a course on women's liberation through the recently established Seattle Free University. Several FSP members were participants, including party leader Clara Fraser, who was invited to give a lecture.[16] After eight successful weeks, participants founded *Radical Women*, the city's first women's liberation organization. Susan Stern's autobiography recalls that "political dissension made the meetings hopelessly tedious" and that "the group wasn't as successful as the classes because we could never agree on our goals. Most of the differences lay between young, action-oriented women, and older, education-oriented women.[17] The group continued after Stern left and, in 1973, Radical Women voted to formally affiliate with FSP.[18] Despite playing a major role in the development of the women's liberation movement in the Seattle area, FSP was a very small organization of approximately 20-25 members.[19] Because of its small membership, the defection of individual members made a significant impact. Though several men were among those who founded the party, a series of splits and resignations led to a shift in its gender composition. Party leader Gloria Martin recalled that "for a six-month period in 1971, the FSP membership was exclusively female, and from that day forward, nobody, female or male, was invited to join unless they were consciously prepared

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[16] Winslow, *Revolutionary Feminists,* 35.

[17] Susan Stern, *With the Weathermen: The Personal Journal of Revolutionary Woman*, editor Laura Browder, (Doubleday & Company Inc, 2007) 20. The "older, education-oriented women" referenced by Stern were likely FSP members Clara Fraser and Gloria Martin.

[18] Radical Women, *The Radical Women Manifesto: Socialist Feminist Theory, Program, and Organizational Structure* (Red Letter Press, 2001). Radical Women continues to be an affiliate of the Freedom Socialist Party.

[19] "Why We Organized a New Socialist Party," Freedom Socialist Party private archive, Seattle, Washington.

to respect and live with women leaders."[20] The rise of unquestioned female leadership made it unique among political parties of all stripes.

FSP represented a hybrid of New Left and Trotskyist ideals, all of which contributed to their support for the UWU-I. FSP synchronizes their understanding of Marxism with the second wave feminist ideology of socialist feminism. Summing up their ideology, a 1985 FSP position paper quotes Trotskyist Murry Weiss, "women are the unacknowledged leadership of the proletariat today." Continuing further, it quotes FSP co-founder Clara Fraser who argued for an orientation toward the "low-paid powerless strata" of "women, youth, minorities, and lesbians and gays*"* who were the "leading edge of the new American working class, and their consciousness is light years ahead of the moribund chauvinists." [21] Opposition to established labour leaders, who they blamed for failing to organize and defend the non-white male working class, was also a common belief. Among the chauvinists, in FSP's estimation, were the "the aristocrats of labor, the labor lieutenants of the capitalist class," who were "the 'ebb tide' sector in the labour movement."[22] Because labour leaders failed to prioritize "the particular demands of oppressed people for protection from all types of discrimination [and] for job training, upward mobility, and childcare," FSP and its followers viewed independence as a source of strength rather than a hindrance. FSP's affiliate Radical Women rejected "male-bashing" and instead argued that "the property system, not the male gender, was responsible for female

[20] Martin, 5.

[21] Monica Hill, "Women's Emancipation and Permanent Revolution" *Freedom Socialist*, Summer 1988/1989.

[22] Hill, "Women's Emancipation and Permanent Revolution" *Freedom Socialist*, Summer 1988/1989.

subjugation."[23] FSP and RW's ideologies do not fit neatly in either orthodox Trotskyism or modern feminism, making it a unique hybrid of both.

Democratic centralism is a core operating principle for all Leninist organizations and UWU-I was unusual in organized labour for its adherence to this principle. Democratic centralism is an organizing principle used primarily among Marxist-Leninist organizations in which party members are expected to vigorously debate organizational positions internally. Once decisions are made, all members are then expected to publicly support the decision, regardless as to their personal beliefs on the matter.[24] The results of this strategy on the socialist movement have been mixed; in some cases, democratic centralism has been the basis for revolutionary political action which allowed for all members of an organization to act in unison and thus increase the power of a numerically small group. Oral history interviews with members of FSP stressed that there was "nothing nefarious about" their version of democratic centralism.[25] In some cases, longtime leaders within some groups have ostensibly supported internal democracy while manipulating the organization to strengthen their personal positions. The worst-case scenarios have led to the creation of political cults.[26] One of the most prominent examples of this is that of the aforementioned Socialist Workers' Party. The SWP degenerated into what former members and observers, including former national leader Barry Sheppard, considered a political cult. In his memoir, he describes the cult-like status of fellow leader Jack Barnes: "The nature of the cult around Jack Barnes was twofold. He became the sole initiator of policy, and the supreme

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[23] Radical Women, *The Radical Women Manifesto*, 10.

[24] The *Marxist Internet Archive* describes the three primary principles of democratic centralism to be "Proletarian (or participatory) democracy," "Unity in Action," and "the balance between centralism and democracy." "Glossary of Terms," *Encyclopedia of Marxism*: https://www.marxists.org/glossary/terms/d/e.htm

[25] Helen Gilbert, email to the author, November 10, 2025.

[26] Janja Lalich,. "The cadre ideal: Origins and development of a political cult." *Cultic Studies Journal* 9, no. 1 (1992): 1-77.

arbiter in any discussion. The obvious result was a growing fear among other leaders of freely expressing their views, else they be deemed "wrong."[27] While it occurred prior to Barnes' rise within the SWP, the inability to discuss positions outside of those held by the SWP's majority was one of the key reasons for the Freedom Socialist Party's split in 1966.[28] Despite the negative experiences of many founding members of those involved in the Freedom Socialist Party, United Workers Union-Independent embraced the principle early on.

Democratic centralist policies were adopted almost immediately by the SROC. An unsigned document, written just 19 days after the initial meeting, shows that the concept of democratic centralism as a criterion for SROC membership was already being developed. The document lists several conditions for membership: agreement with the SROC's goals and strategy, agreeing "to maintain solidarity outside SROC" and being "responsible for bringing up concerns and disagreements inside SROC" as the three primary criteria for group membership.[29] The concept (though not the phrase itself) was later written in their bylaws and continued to be a core operating principle throughout its existence. The demand for "full solidarity in carrying out the union's business" played out in several ways. For example, in 1977, the union decided to fully commit itself to defending Rosa Morales, a Chicana feminist staffer in UW's Chicano Studies Department. However, not all members wanted to do so; rather than challenge the policy directly, one member agreed to testify on Morales' behalf and then failed to do so. In response,

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[27] Sheppard, 210.

[28] As FSP members wrote in their outgoing pamphlet, "We are resigning in protest against the kind of a party the SWP has become. We are resigning because we see no realistic chance of being allowed to even criticize it." Richard Fraser et al. "*Why We Left the Socialist Workers Party*" 1966, *Encyclopedia of Trotskyism On-Line 2006/Prometheus Research Library.*

[29] Staff Rights Organizing Committee, October 15, 1973 "Miscellaneous Personal Notes 1973-1974" Box 4, Folder 86. United Workers Union-Independent records, 1973-1980, University of Washington Special Collections.

President Yolanda Alaniz, who also chaired the Rosa Morales Defense Committee, wrote a letter chastising her, citing the union's principles:

> I realize there may be some personal matters involved, but regardless, we as union members always support each other, especially when we are asked to and have promised to. Our personal opinions on personal issues are beside the point. Our priority is what is best for our union and our union members. If you do not agree with this basic principle of solidarity in our union then it seems to me you should seriously consider resigning.[30]

The influence of the Freedom Socialist Party and Radical Women, both organizations which had predated SROC/UWU-I, was substantial. UWU-I, which sat at the intersection of Trotskyism, Socialist Feminism and the labour movement, challenges the notion of a hard break between the Old and New Lefts. The unique ideas which led to the creation of UWU-I also allowed it to develop into a union which fought for its own members while also seeking to influence the broader labour movement.

In the United States, the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) has been the principal law which has governed whether a union legally represents a specific group of workers since the 1930s. This framework is based on the ideas of exclusivity and majoritarianism, i.e. a legally-certified union gains the sole right to exclusively represent workers once it can prove that a majority of workers in a specific workplace or unit wants to be members of that union.[31] The NLRA does not affect governmental workers. University workers are state employees and are covered by a Washington state body. UWU-I did not seek to be a conventional union. It was, instead, recognized as an entity by the Higher Education Personnel (HEP) Board, a state board

[30] Yolanda Alainiz to Vicky Lopez, February 23, 1978, "Yolanda Alaniz Correspondence to Members, 1977-1978," Box 9, Folder 19, United Workers Union-Independent records, 1973-1980, University of Washington Special Collections.

[31] Bruce Nissen, "Building a "Minority Union": The CWA Experience at NCR," *Labor Studies Journal*, Winter 2001. 34-55.

which oversaw Washington's public universities and colleges.[32] Armed with this partial recognition, the union developed a version of solidarity unionism, a concept identified by historian Staughton Lynd in the early 1990s. He observed a kind of union organization which opposes contracts between workers and employers because they included no-strike clauses. Instead, solidarity unions focus on collective direct action to defend workplace rights and win concessions from management. Lynd argues that this strategy is what propelled the labour uprisings involving the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and the early Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO).[33] While UWU-I did not share his opposition to contracts in principle, UWU-I viewed its actions as an attempt to reignite a conservative labour movement, consciously linking earlier radicalism to its own activities. For example, at their third anniversary party, the union highlighted the history of the 1937-41 Virginia tobacco strikes, which featured Black women workers who fought for and won reforms despite being initially ignored by male labour leaders.[34]

Besides defending members from employers' harassment and advocating for better government policies, it was also concerned with influencing the policies of related unions. United Workers was open to all workers at the University of Washington, including those who were already members of existing unions. Rather than segregating their members from other existing unions and forming a dual union, members whose positions were already part of other

[32] The Higher Education Personnel Board was a state board which governed labour relations at all university and community colleges in the state. The HEP Board recognized UWU-I and frequently interacted with it as a representative of its membership.

[33] Staughton Lynd. *Solidarity Unionism: Rebuilding the labor movement from below*. (PM Press, 2015). Although practiced by a variety of unions, solidarity unionism is most closely identified with the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW).

[34] ""Rebirth of the Labor Movement: Independent Unions Lead The Way UWU-I Anniversary Program 1977." UWU-I Anniversary Program and Financial Report, 1977, Box 9, Folder 24. United Workers Union-Independent records, 1973-1980, University of Washington Special Collections.

unions also worked within those structures to effect change. Hill recalled that "We still sent people and had representatives [to other campus unions] and some of their people actually joined our picket lines or didn't cross them even though they were ordered to cross them by their union so that was an interesting debate too that grew the consciousness of people on campus."[35] Henry Noble, an early joiner of United Workers, worked as a computer programmer and was already an active at-large member of Washington Federation of State Employees Local 1488.[36] Thus, despite the influence of the Trotskyist movement in UWU-I, the union's structure shared much in common with both the syndicalist strategy of minority unions associated with the Industrial Workers of the World while still engaging with mainstream unions.[37]

Opponents on the Left and in the mainstream labour movement condemned UWU-I as a dual union. In the North American context, a dual union is an organization set up outside of an existing union structure which competes for the loyalty of members in the same workplace. This is generally understood to be harmful to the interests of workers, especially by members of the existing union. This is especially true when one side is a company-controlled union, as was often the case prior to the 1930s when "company unions" were declared illegal in the United States with the passage of the National Labor Relations Act. While rejecting the politically loaded charge of dual unionism, UWU-I positioned its activities as a positive force, . As described by Monica Hill in a 1975 Radical Women document:

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[35] Hill, interview

[36] Noble, interview

[37] James P. Cannon, who was secretary of the SWP from 1938 to 1953, wrote that "in industries, however, where there are no unions, or where the existing unions are hopelessly decrepit and block the organization of the workers, it is the party duty to organize the unorganized masses into the unions and in connection with this procedure fight to affiliate them, with proper guarantees against the betrayal of the workers, to the AFL or independent mass unions." James P. Cannon, "Letter to the American Commission," June 16, 1927. *James P. Cannon and the Early Years of American Communism. Selected Writings and Speeches, 1920-1928* (Spartacist Publishing Company, 1992). https://www.marxists.org/archive/cannon/works/1927/lettertoamcomm.htm June 16, 1927.

> When a new union [forms] which has [been] swept into being in angry protest to bureaucratically controlled unions that the workers no longer trust" this "inevitably strengthen[s]s the labor movement by injecting it with new militancy, rank and file control, and the radical politics that are underpinning of both.[38]

One example of charges of sectarianism and dual-unionism occurred in 1977 following coverage of that year's public Radical Women conference. Lindy Laub, a reporter for *Pandora*, Seattle's feminist newspaper, wrote that, according to unnamed "advanced AFSCME members," the small alternative union's existence "reduced their credibility, and thus their effectiveness" and that the SWP, which opted to work within the union should be credited as the "single force" in pushing WFSE toward more progressive principles. Laub also accused United Workers and Radical Women of being sectarian front groups organized by FSP rather than legitimate organizations.[39] FSP's newspaper rejected the charges and criticized the reporter herself, writing that she was an "SWP undercover agent."[40] Nonetheless, allegations of dual-unionism and sectarianism followed the Freedom Socialist Party, Radical Women, and United Workers, especially when coming into contact with the Socialist Workers Party, the Spartacist League, and other groups which supported the more traditional entryist union tactics.

From Hill's discovery in late September until the end of 1973, SROC quickly built a diverse coalition of employees, students, and residents to oppose the reclassification system. Among its activities included publishing a thirty page booklet laying out their findings, recognizing coordinators in eighty campus buildings and university hospitals and gaining the support of UW's student government groups. Student groups were "united in their concern that the new system perpetuates discriminatory patterns of classifications and pay and does not allow

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[38] Monica Hill, *Why Independent Unions?* Radical Women Publications: 1975.

[39] Lindy Laub, "Radical Women Debate," *Pandora*, Spring 1976, 4.

[40] "The SWP and Pandora: An Odd Couple" *The Freedom Socialist*, Spring 1977, 20.

merit principles to be applied."[41] Student body president Wendy Holden told the Higher Education Personnel Board "I want to impress the committee with how much furor there is over this. This is the first time this has happened since the spring of 1970, when there were protests over the war in Cambodia."[42] This rapid organization inspired SROC and instilled it with confidence. It was in contact with staff at other universities where quasi-illegal strikes by public employees had produced meaningful results, "We know that employees from Seattle Community College, Berkely [sic], and many other dissatisfied colleges have been successful in their strike because students, staff and faculty have been united in a common cause."[43] SROC built a broad-based coalition of students, staff, and sympathetic faculty which they believed could shut the university down if needed.

On October 12, 300 UW staff packed an Evergreen State College meeting room to testify against the reclassification plan. A newspaper described their objections, saying that the plan "would mean the downgrading of job descriptions, accepting of inaccurate job titles and lower pay for persons hired to replace current jobholders." Monica Hill told the board "we have the power to shut the UW down if this last resort becomes a necessity." Strike committee chairwoman Yolanda Abeyta (Alaniz) warned that SROC would engage in escalated work stoppages before a full strike would be called.[44] On October 28, an appeal board was established to review individual cases of classification problems, which SROC decried because it lacked

[41] "Staff Rights Organizing Committee testimony," November 3, 1973, Box 4, Folder 85, United Workers Union-Independent records, 1973-1980, University of Washington Special Collections.

[42] "Education Workers Protest New Plan," November 5, 1973, *Kitsap Sun*, 25.

[43] Monica Hill, October 10, 1973, "Oct 10 PUBLIC MEETING," "Speeches of Steering Committee, 1973" Box 9, Folder 11, United Workers Union-Independent records, 1973-1980, University of Washington Special Collections.

[44] "UW workers protest pay plan" October 13, 1973, *Longview Daily News*, 15.

representatives of support staff. On November 3, Monica Hill addressed a Joint Hearing of the state committees on higher education regarding the proposed HEPB classification system.[45] On November 16, members attempted unsuccessfully to shut down the university from 10:30am to 1:00pm during which time a meeting of the HEP Board. SROC urged staff to leave their posts and attend the meeting, many of whom did. At the meeting, which was held in the university's basketball arena, almost 2,000 angry classified staff members from across the state were in attendance, with many carrying protest signs and work instruments such as mops and aprons. Many had illegally walked off the job in order to attend. However, despite this opposition, the HEP Board voted to move forward with the system.[46] While a confrontation between SROC and the university seemed inevitable, organizers faced opposition from within the ranks of organized labour.

SROC initially sought a constructive relationship with WFSE Local 1488 based on what they assumed would be mutual opposition to the same system. However, it soon became clear that WFSE was committed to implementing the reclassification system. On November 2, WFSE came out in opposition to a delay in the implementation of the reclassification system, unsurprisingly as it had helped devise it. WFSE recognized that "employees in higher education want to get rid of the existing regressive classification systems" that were developed by management to serve management" Yet it still demanded that the reclassification plan begin on January 1, 1974 as planned. It argued that those who would receive increased salaries under the new plan deserved to have those funds without delay. Nonetheless, despite supporting the implementation of the reclassification plan without immediate changes, WFSE also stated that it

[45] “Staff Rights Organizing Committee testimony,” November 3, 1973, Box 4, Folder 85, United Workers Union-Independent records, 1973-1980, University of Washington Special Collections.

[46] "Board plans statewide job classification" *The News Tribune*, November 18, 1973, G-6.

was opposed to the system which meant 4,000-5,000 classified employees would receive no pay raise. Rather than direct action, WFSE argued that the remedy was to petition the state legislature for increased funding. Regarding the protests, WFSE decided to establish information centers on campus "to assist employees with their problems and to answer their questions" and maintained its right to be the sole representative of university workers in its bargaining units, stating that "union members and its paid staff will deal directly with the administration."[47] Given the widespread success and credibility SROC gained for discovering and leading the fight against the reclassification system, it is likely that WFSE viewed SROC as a threat to its position as the primary representative of workers at the University of Washington. However, from the very beginning, SROC sought to reassure WFSE and its parent union AFSCME that it was not competition. An early newsletter unequivocally wrote "There are those in [WFSE] who would like to make this into an organizational power struggle; we want it to be a struggle on issues. SROC is not trying to take members away from AFSCME."[48] Despite this, Monica Hill recalled that “they were very nasty to us.”[49]

WFSE offered a professionalized approach which relied on studies, experts, and the lobbying of elected officials. It repeatedly told members that the only effective way to address inequalities was through “the legislature itself,"[50] WFSE had a friendly relationship with the state

[47] The Washington Federation of State Employees AFL-CIO, "News Bulletin: Union Demands Salary Increases Jan. 1," November 2, 1973, “Miscellaneous Personal Notes” Box 4, Folder 86, United Workers Union-Independent records, 1973-1980, University of Washington Special Collections.

[48] "Open Letter to Union Brothers and Sisters" *The Staff Rights Organizer*, Vol. 1, No. 3, 2.

[49] Monica Hill, interviewed by Thomas MacMillan, July 9, 2024.

[50] Washington Federation of State Employees Reports, Etc. "What Is the Union Doing About Discrimination in Salaries?" n.d., Box 10, Folder 69, United Workers Union-Independent records, 1973-1980, University of Washington Special Collections.

government, with which it emphasized cooperation in implementing the collective agreement.[51] Public sector unions in Washington State are not allowed to negotiate over wages and thus must obtain increases through the legislative process. In response to “some spontaneous activities coming from different groups on our campus,” WFSE 1488's December newsletter noted that "the time has come to be realistic about the things facing us in the future, as they have faced us in the past" before listing the improvements previously won through lobbying. It then called on SROC's leadership and the "employees following them [to] join with us" in going to the 1974 Legislature to lobby and petition for better pay scales for women and other improvements.[52] On the eve of the strike, WFSE attempted to break the strike by urging its members and their fellow classified employees "to stay on the job" because "the proposed work stoppage will not bring about any positive changes in the day-to-day working conditions for classified employees." WFSE members were instructed that those crossing SROC's picket lines had "no reason...to fear reporting to work during any work stoppage that has not been authorized by a recognized Union." WFSE again exhorted "all classified employees at the University to join in the fight to accomplish these goals by directing your energies in the only arena where the goals can be accomplished -- in the state legislature in Olympia."[53] While it is true on a legalistic level, due to Washington’s ban on public sector bargaining for wages, the broader point made was that SROC’s “spontaneous actions” aimed at disrupting the university’s functioning could not accomplish their goals; only lobbying legislators for more funding could do so. SROC’s

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[51] "Union-management program emphasizes problem-solving," *Washington State Employee*, November 1973, Volume 1, no. 3. 1.

[52]Washington Federation of State Employees Local 1488, "Newsletter," December 1973, Box 10, Folder 69, United Workers Union-Independent records, 1973-1980, University of Washington Special Collections.

[53] Local 148--Washington Federation of State Employees (AFL-CIO), "The Union's position on the proposed work Stoppage," December 1973, Box 10, Folder 69, United Workers Union-Independent records, 1973-1980, University of Washington Special Collections.

combative approach contrasted immensely with WFSE's and the much larger and well-established union used its full institutional weight to undermine the strike. SROC alleged that WFSE agreed to alert the police if strikers attempted to prevent workers from crossing their picket lines. SROC called out WFSE, stating that "now we know that WFSE is turning itself into an organization of company scabs and no longer has the right to call itself a union."[54]

While SROC was able to mobilize workers and supporters when testifying at public hearings, their coalition was undermined by internal dissension. Approximately a week prior to the scheduled strike, five SROC members refused to commit to support it, two of whom were then expelled from the SROC steering committee. The self-described moderates then called a news conference to denounce SROC and the planned strike. One such member was Yvette Winters who was a supervisor of switchboard operators.[55] She claimed that radicals had "been harassing my operators" into supporting the strike. SROC, being a pressure group rather than a union, was open to supervisors and others who opposed reclassification. Two previously involved clerical workers, Sharon Kabelac and Jane Fantel, opposed the strike because the group lacked a defense fund and workers potentially risked their jobs by striking. Fantel told the press that "we're afraid people will be badly hurt" while announcing her hope that a legal injunction would delay the reclassification plan. She told reporters "I believe in the court system." The opposition group also hoped that Governor Daniel Evans would intervene and demand more funding in the upcoming legislative session. Kabelac stated "to us, that matters. But they say 'Don't listen to him.'" The moderates red-baited the organization, contending that radicals "are

[54] Staff Rights Organizing Committee, "WFSE Leaders Become SCAB Leaders," "Pamphlet: Strike Starts December 18, 1973," Box 4, Folder 100, United Workers Union-Independent records, 1973-1980, University of Washington Special Collections.

[55] In 1980, an UWU-I led grievance led to Yvette Winters' removal from her position as supervisor. It alleged that she and another supervisor had committed more than 50 labour violations. Craig Tomashoff, "UW operators win battle; minor war continues" *UW Daily*, June 6, 1980, 6.

working from a theory of confrontation policies" and that outsiders were controlling the group.[56] While internal opponents believed the majority in SROC were puppets of irresponsible radicals hellbent on confrontation, university administrators disagreed. Two weeks prior to the proposed strike, Director of Personnel Service David Williams reached out to Monica Hill via telephone to discuss the situation, which they agreed allowed each side to respectfully share their perspectives. In a follow-up letter, Williams wrote that while the university disagreed with some of SROC's conclusions, "there is no question with either the intent or expression of honest concern which the group has raised."[57] SROC described the opposition group as "sell-outs" unable to tolerate "a threat to their comfortable positions."[58] The strike was initially due to begin on December 18 but was pushed back a day to allow for a court to potentially grant an injunction against the HEP Board's decision, which they declined to do. Though opposed by liberal co-workers, including WFSE leadership and a segment of the classified staff, the first strike in University of Washington history began on December 19.

The precise number of strikers is unknown, including by strike organizers. Monica Hill recalled "I don't think there was ever an official number known of how many people went out on strike -- that anybody went out was what was remarkable."[59] Contemporary reporting estimated that between 30 and 150 people were striking on the first day. *Pandora* reported that "about 7,000 classified staff are affected by the new system, but telephone checks showed most

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[56] Solveig Torvik, December 13, 1973, "'Moderates' Withdraw Support Of UW Classified Staff Strike," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, D-8.

[57] David E. Williams to Monica Hill, "SROC Correspondence, 1973-1974," December 4, 1973, Box 4, Folder 75, United Workers Union-Independent records, 1973-1980, University of Washington Special Collections.

[58] Staff Rights Organizing Committee, STRIKE FOR SURVIVAL - NOBODY GOES BACK TILL EVERYBODY GOES BACK!" "Pamphlet: Strike Starts December 18, 1973," Box 4, Folder 100, United Workers Union-Independent records, 1973-1980, University of Washington Special Collections.

[59] Monica Hill, email to the author, February 17, 2025.

departments were operating with nearly all employees present."[60] Support was strongest among the lowest paid workers, including those in food service, switchboard operators, and janitors. Allies in WFSE took sick days to avoid crossing the picket lines, though most union members followed their recommendation. To support strikers, SROC and allies organized a full-time strike kitchen, raised emergency funding to cover strikers' rent, while also providing childcare, legal services, and medical aid for those in need.[61] UW increased the number of police on campus and picketers were occasionally menaced by authorities. SROC's *Strike Bulletin* reported that "armed guards have been stationed at doorways, and a police escort has been ordered for delivery trucks." The strike bulletin said that picketers were able to convince unionized truckers to not cross their picket line for delivery. This success led to the threat of police violence "On the second day of the strike when one lone picketer persuaded seven truckers not to deliver their loads, a campus cop threatened to arrest her. With clenched fists he threatened, "If I weren't a cop I'd show you what I think of your strike and Monica Hill!"[62] SROC received support from students and campus organizations, especially those involved with the Feminist Coordinating Council. The Council noted that "as feminists we applaud the creation of a union with the courage to attack the systematic discrimination of all oppressed people as well as advocate for better salaries and working conditions."[63] Graduate student Brishkai Rothenberger wrote that she had "picketed during the strike and was amazed that [WFSE] would not support co-workers on the picket line. Therefore I feel the need for another union on campus that would resist the

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[60] "Planned Strike Fizzles: New University Job Classifications Implemented Jan. 1" *Pandora*, December 25, 1973, 3.

[61] "A Union that Wins," *United Workers Organizer*, February 19, 1974, 1.

[62]"CAMPUS COPS EVERYWHERE!" !Strike Bulletin!, December 26, 1973, 2. Box 4, Folder 70, United Workers Union-Independent records, 1973-1980, University of Washington Special Collections.

[63] "Feminist Support," *UW Daily*, date unknown.

discriminatory policies of the University, rather than acquiesce to the implementation of the HEPB classification system. United Workers, founded by SROC, will be the alternative."[64] While SROC received support from some allies, it was also ignored or opposed by others on the Left. As well as the moderate classified workers, it denounced "separatist minority and feminist groups," which they described as "nowhere to be seen during the strike." Separatist groups "were intent on maintaining the false separation between the sexes and races in order to keep their token positions as representatives of their respective movements." Thus, strikers argued, they "became pawns in the hand of management's divide-and-conquer tactics."[65]

The reclassification system went into effect on January 1 as planned and the strike ended on January 2 when the University reopened for the new year. Opponents on the Left labeled the strike "adventuristic" and members of the Socialist Workers Party joined segments of Local 1488 in crossing SROC's picket lines.[66] Despite this, union organizers continued pushing back. The strike, though not universally supported and somewhat disorganized, yielded positive results for a handful of individual workers. Monica Hill was initially set to receive a cut in pay under the new system but instead, due to the attention she had received while protesting, was given a 10% pay raise. An unnamed food service worker who had been set for demotion under the new system was returned to her original pay level during the protests. However, many other strikers initially faced negative consequences, including demotion and outright firing. For example, two Black women working in food service were among those penalized for striking. Food service workers Jossie Anthony and Leonia Kidd were downwardly reclassified.[67] Organizers also

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[64] "Graduate Support," *UW Daily*, date unknown.

[65] "A Union that Wins," *United Workers Organizer*, February 19, 1974, 1.

[66] Monica Hill, email to the author, February 17, 2025.

[67] "A Union that Wins," *United Workers Organizer*, February 19, 1974, 1.

complained that some supervisors withheld paychecks from strikers.[68] In response, union grievance coordinator and janitor Clarence Bennett "led workers and their supporters in a sit-in to demand that all retaliation be immediately reversed. We had said in the beginning that nobody would go back to work until everybody did, and we meant it. By the end of the third day, Acting President Cartwright had met every Union demand."[69] This experience was a major one for many of those involved. Lois Harris (Danks) recalled this moment as being one of her most joyous moments of organizing, recalling that it was "very satisfying" "to think that we could do that and to sit there and to see [President Cartwright] make a call and tell the food service supervisor to give them their jobs back and that supervisor was fired shortly after that."[70] With the strike behind them, SROC founded the United Workers Union-Independent. UWU-I published the first edition of its newsletter in mid-February 1974 and most of it was spent recounting the strike and the lessons they had learned as a result. The comradeship which SROC had hoped to build with WFSE was gone. In its place was a bitter resentment for their strike-breaking leadership. The union's harsh critique was directed not only at the state government but also at others on the Left who ignored SROC or collaborated with management to oppose it.

> The strike did something else of major importance. It exposed the bankruptcy of other union's leadership, such as the Washington Federation of State Employees. It voted to order its members to cross our picket lines and to alert campus police against 'possible violence'. In court, the leaders of this same union sat at the same table with management to fight against the workers. No wonder, their lawyer used to be the [Higher Education Personnel Board] lawyer.[71]

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[68] After all strikers had returned to work, Acting President Cartwright wrote an open letter to Monica Hill published in the campus newspaper which claimed that no reprisals had occurred and that strikers could have avoided doing so if only they had followed the rules set forth by the university. "From the President," *UW Daily*, date unknown.

[69] "A Union that Wins," *United Workers Organizer*, February 19, 1974, 1.

[70] Lois Danks, interviewed by Thomas MacMillan, July 10, 2024.

[71] "A Union that Wins," *United Workers Organizer*, February 19, 1974, 1.

AFSCME is known for being a vocal supporter of the Civil Rights Movement and many of its leaders marched with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In internal AFSCME politics, WFSE was one of the more racially progressive affiliates. They were supporters of President Jerry Wurf, a former socialist who was a high-profile supporter of Martin Luther King, Jr.[72] In 1972, their delegates to the national convention nominated William Lucy for secretary-treasurer and in so doing helped elect one of the first Black leaders of a majority white union in the United States. AFSCME members at other universities such as California-Berkeley had recently been on the front lines of feminist union activity.[73] Because of this belief in the progressive potential of WFSE's membership, United Workers developed an inside-outside strategy to influence larger labour unions. Because it did not have a bargaining unit of its own, membership included anyone who agreed with their principles from across the university. WFSE, being an state-certified union, bargained on behalf of about 1,300 workers at UW. It represented primarily the highest paid and most technically oriented staff. It also represented janitorial staff and food service workers, both of which were among the lowest paid on campus; however, many of them felt under-represented and sought out membership in United Workers. Clerical workers were not part of their jurisdiction but could join it as an at-large member. They also had the option of joining the Classified Staff Association, an advocacy group for support staff who did not wish to be part of organized labour. During the reclassification protests, CSA was the only worker organization which cooperated with the university's ad hoc committee which sought to solve problems

[72] "WFSE History: 80 Years of Speaking up for WA's Public Workers" <https://www.wfse.org/wfse-history-80-years-speaking-was-public-workers>

[73] Jennifer L. Pierce, ""We Were Democracy Mad:" Clerical Workers' Unionism, Antiracism, and Feminism at the University of California, Berkeley, 1966–1972." *International Labor and Working-Class History* 102 (2022): 181-199.

through individual grievances.[74] Workers who join more than one union at a time are known as dual carders, a practice discouraged by labour leaders but common among radicals. Dual-carders worked within other unions to pressure union leadership to embrace UWU-I's priorities like affirmative action, comparable worth, and across-the-board raises. Hill recalled that United Workers "sent people and had representatives" who agitated for their values.[75] A United Workers-sponsored resolution called on WFSE to prioritize

> ending discrimination against women and minorities by promoting childcare programs, upward mobility opportunities, job training, women in non-traditional trades, equal pay for equal work and equal pay for comparable worth - all basic rights and all pre-requisites toward ending discrimination in employment.[76]

United Workers continued to denounce WFSE's leadership for years to come. In 1975, UWU-I launched a campaign for $200 per month across-the-board raise for all state employees, arguing that "percentage raises discriminate against low paid workers, who are primarily minorities and women."[77] It castigated WFSE leadership for having "sold out their own membership and all state workers by making deals with management and ignoring the collective

[74] It later became part of SEIU 925, a nationwide local which represents SEIU-affiliated clerical workers across the United States. SEIU Local 925 is the largest union on the UW campus as it represents over 5,000 members. Classified Staff Association, "Who? What? When? Why?" "Other Unions, 1974-77," n.d. pamphlet. Box 6, Folder 5, United Workers Union-Independent records, 1973-1980, University of Washington Special Collections.

[75] Monica Hill, interviewed by Thomas MacMillan, July 9, 2024.

[76] United Workers Union-Independent, "Resolution for AFSCME 1488 To the 1976 WFSE Convention," "Other Unions, 1974-77," n.d. pamphlet. Box 6, Folder 5, United Workers Union-Independent records, 1973-1980, University of Washington Special Collections.

[77] United Workers Union-Independent, "To WFSE locals of Washington state," January 16, 1975, Box 6, Folder 5, United Workers Union-Independent records, 1973-1980, University of Washington Special Collections.

power of their own union to get all of us fair wages."[78] Though it condemned the leadership, UWU-I pledged to not cross picket lines should the members go on strike.[79]

United Workers also prioritized support for strikes of workers from marginalized public sector workers. A key component of UWU-I's actions involved joining picket lines and offering support to strike actions by other public and low-income workers. Leadership viewed this kind of support as a way of educating "our own members to the importance of union and worker solidarity and to make friends with other union's rank and file members on the picket line."[80] They also sought to "stop [union leaders from] acting like condescending bureaucrats."[81] In May 1974, for example, they wrote to the UW community that "we are joining the custodians and elevator operators on their picket lines, for we fully recognize that this is our fight too."[82] In May 1977, Washington's public workers were contemplating a statewide strike. While UWU-I pledged support and the independent Washington Public Employees Association (WPEA) voted in favour, WFSE's leadership was non-committal, preferring to continue lobbying the Legislature without resorting to a potentially illegal strike. Despite being a union of just 3,000 members operating without the support of the AFL-CIO and Teamsters, the WPEA launched a two-day strike. United Workers members joined them on the picket lines in support. Rather than

[78] United Workers Union-Independent, "To WFSE locals of Washington state," January 16, 1975, Box 6, Folder 5, United Workers Union-Independent records, 1973-1980, University of Washington Special Collections.

[79] United Workers Union-Independent, "United Workers Supports State Employees Strike," January 17, 1975, Box 6, Folder 5, United Workers Union-Independent records, 1973-1980, University of Washington Special Collections.

[80] United Workers Union-Independent, "Proposed strike support action of UWU-I for SEIU's Providence Hospital Strike," February 1976, Box 6, Folder 5, United Workers Union-Independent records, 1973-1980, University of Washington Special Collections.

[81] United Workers Union-Independent, "Proposed strike support action of UWU-I for SEIU's Providence Hospital Strike,"

[82] United Workers Union-Independent, "On the picket line with SEIU Strikers," May 8, 1974, Box 6, Folder 5, United Workers Union-Independent records, 1973-1980, University of Washington Special Collections.

outrightly engaging in strike-breaking as they had in 1973, WFSE head George Masten said "We're telling our people that they'll have to exercise their own consciences."[83] Following the strike, the current UWU-I president Yolanda Alaniz wrote that the

> WPEA's strike, as did ours on campus 4 years ago, clearly showed the lines between the bosses and the workers, between the union bureaucrats, and the rank and file and between the elected state officials and us-the taxpayers. And the strike brought our demand of across the board raises to the forefront. WPEA was striking for all of us and we supported them.[84]

The *Bellingham Herald,* echoing the lack of support given to SROC four years prior, wrote in the aftermath that "the Teamsters called the strike illegal and powerful AFL-CIO unions were angered by the actions of the nonaffiliated workers: the strike's biggest opponents thus were, ironically, labor unions."[85] More than just advocacy, United Workers sought to use picket lines, both real and potential, to advocate for socialist-feminist politics which highlighted divides between "union bureaucrats and the rank and file."

UWU-I's priorities included defending a radical conception of affirmative action and comparable worth (pay equity).[86] The fight for these policies was taken up by working class feminists across the country after legislation passed during the African-American Civil Rights movement made intervention by sympathetic federal and state authorities a potential avenue for addressing these inequalities. UWU-I fought for a re-orientation of the university towards the needs of working women and racial minorities. Both of these efforts have their origins in laws

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[83] "State council can't take stand on strike" *Tacoma News Tribune*, May 10, 1977, 1.

[84] "United Workers Union-Independent, "To all union members," May 24, 1977, Box 9, Folder 19, "Yolanda Alaniz Correspondence to Member, 1977-1978." United Workers Union-Independent records, 1973-1980, University of Washington Special Collections.

[85] "What did the state strike accomplish?" *Sunday Herald*, May 15, 1977, 4.

[86] Linda M. Blum defines the term as "a strategy to raise wages for women's sex-segregated occupations" while others define it as "the reevaluation of the worth of women's work." Linda M. Blum*, Between Feminism and Labor: The Significance of the Comparable Worth Movement*, (University of California Press, 1991), 1.

passed in the 1960s. The 1963 Equal Pay Act prohibited discrimination on account of sex in the payment of wages by employers and Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act outlawed racial and sexual discrimination in the United States. Legal scholar Cynthia Deitch argues that it "had an unprecedented impact on class relations...it gave workers a new vehicle and terrain-the EEOC-for contesting unfair treatment by their bosses."[87] WFSE quickly noticed the energy and anger behind SROC's campaign and took up the issue of structural inequality against women workers with Washington's state government. United Workers had reason to believe that AFSCME could be persuaded to fight against gender inequality, as AFSCME-affiliated clerical workers at the University of California-Berkeley had in 1970 led the way in challenging for comparable worth.[88]

Days after the uproarious November 16 Higher Education Personnel Board hearing which featured the attendance of two thousand university workers in a widespread effort to shut down the university during the hearings via wildcat strike, WFSE executive director Norm Schut sent a letter to governor Daniel Evans stating that personnel boards "have perpetuated the discrimination in salary setting against women that permeates through the private sector and other government units." He asked Evans to address the issue legislatively, to which the moderate Republican agreed.[89] In December, a private company was contracted to conduct a comprehensive study of salaries for state workers exempt from state civil service laws, which included classified staff at the University of Washington. The study found that, across the 242

[87] Cynthia Deitch. "Gender, race, and class politics and the inclusion of women in Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act." *Gender & Society* 7, no. 2 (1993): 198.

[88] Jennifer L. Pierce, "" Fed Up": A Clerical Workers' Manifesto Sparks a Comparable-Worth Campaign at the University of California at Berkeley, 1970–1974." *Journal of Women's History* 36, no. 3 (2024): 118-138.

[89] Helen Remick. "The case of comparable worth in Washington State." *Review of Policy Research* 5, no. 4 (1986): 840.

different positions surveyed, women workers were devalued by 20% across the board. This study was “the first use of job evaluation techniques to examine sex-based wage inequities specifically.”[90] It was followed up by another in 1976. In 1981, WFSE sued the state of Washington to enforce comparable worth in the public sector and AFSCME v. State of Washington "was the first to hold an employer liable under both disparate treatment and disparate impact analyses across an entire labor force and to order the implementation of a comparable worth plan as a remedy to the Title VII violation."[91] This made Washington a pioneer in the comparable worth movement, an effort with its origins in the protests of classified staff led by the Staff Rights Organizing Committee.[92]

UWU-I took up the cause and sought to defend and expand affirmative action, which the union described “as a means of "actively doing something NOW to heal the wounds caused by decades of discrimination against minorities and women."[93] As early as October 15, 1973, which was less than three weeks after it was founded, SROC’s first priority was "to re-orient priorities in the allocation of funds, so that Affirmative Action programs can be developed and implemented that meet the needs of those on the bottom first, i.e. women, minorities, and low income workers, particularly minority women."[94] Affirmative Action continued to be a priority throughout its first year. In September 1974, the union published a position paper entitled "Necessities for an Effective Affirmative Action Program On The University of Washington

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[90] Linda M. Blum*, Between Feminism and Labor: The Significance of the Comparable Worth Movement*, (University of California Press, 1991), 47.

[91] Diana Stone. "Comparable Worth in the Wake of AFSCME v. State of Washington." *Berkeley Women's Law Journal* 1 (1985): 80.

[92] Remick, 838.

[93] "A Union that Wins," *United Workers Organizer*, February 19, 1974, 1.

[94] Staff Rights Organizing Committee, October 15, 1973, Box 4, Folder 86, United Workers Union-Independent records, 1973-1980, University of Washington Special Collections.

Campus" which called for job training and upward mobility, university-funded childcare, and an end to salary discrimination.[95] As such, the concepts of radical affirmative action and pay equity were deeply embedded in the fabric of United Workers' efforts to defend the rights of the most disadvantaged workers at the University of Washington.

UWU-I's intersectional approach to union organizing drew the loyalty of women and men, especially racial minorities and low-paid workers. Many of the union stalwarts joined Radical Women or the Freedom Socialist Party because of how those organizations fought for and with them, including Yolanda Alaniz, Lois Danks, and Monica Hill. One male worker drawn to the union was Henry Noble, a relatively well-paid computer programmer who was radicalized by the era's revolutionary ferment and ended up committing his life to the socialist-feminist movement. Noble had been involved with Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the anti-war movement. By the early 1970s, Noble moved to Seattle and worked at the University of Washington in the computing center. He was already a dedicated anti-war activist and trade unionist when the staff revolt began at Washington and he quickly became part of the movement. Though he had secure employment, Noble was deeply impressed by the leadership of the women workers who launched the effort; this, in turn, encouraged him to become a feminist. He later recalled that he committed himself to challenging the patriarchal beliefs he had been taught "mostly because I wanted to work with these women [who] I was working with alongside."[96] This was at a time when some feminists refused to work with men at all or with women who mixed with men. One lesbian separatist group took issue with lesbian members of Radical Women participating in the lesbian/gay movement because they associated with men like Noble.

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[95]Staff Rights Organizing Committee, September 1974, Box 3, Folder 4, United Workers Union-Independent records, 1973-1980, University of Washington Special Collections.

[96] Henry Noble, interviewed by Thomas MacMillan, July 9, 2024.

The separatists even vandalized the office of the Freedom Socialist Party and Radical Women.[97] This "anti-man movement," as Noble described it, was part of a "whole different tendency" than what he and his comrades proposed. In an oral history interview, Noble wryly noted that he was grateful for the time spent by radical women who worked to "straighten [him] out."[98]

Once he had been 'straightened out,' Noble was encouraged to take leadership roles in both his union and party. He believed it was because "they were eager to show that they had male members because we were denigrated for being mostly gays and women and people in labour who saw labour as only big strong steelworkers only, they really denigrated us."[99] Noble was one of several male leaders in the union. Their working-class feminism was focused on all "those on the bottom-women, minorities, and low-paid workers."[100] This perspective earned the union the loyalty of several Black and Hispanics workers, including Clarence Bennett. Bennett was an African-American janitor originally from Louisiana. He joined the Staff Rights Organizing Committee and then UWU-I to fight the reclassification system. However, once involved in the struggle, he recognized the necessity of "getting the problems of all aggrieved people rectified." He wrote that:

> I was not going to lie down and let it happen. I decided that, come what may, I was going all the way. We went out on strike. When the strike was over and the administration tried to take revenge on some of us, I led the sit-in, which got **everybody** back to work…I believe if a task is once begun, never leave it til it be done; be the labor great or small, do it well or not at all. United Workers has succeeded and the victory will grow."[101]

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[97] Martin, *Socialist-Feminism: The First Decade*, 77.

[98] Noble, interview.

[99] Noble, interview.

[100] Staff Rights Organizing Committee, "Founding Principles" pamphlet, "Pamphlet Originals, 1973-1975," 1974, Box 4, Folder 3, United Workers Union-Independent records, 1973-1980, University of Washington Special Collections.

[101] "Meet Clarence Bennett" *United Workers Organizer*, February 19, 1974, 4.

When the union met with the University of Washington's president to demand the return of all strikers without penalty, Bennett was UWU-I's only male representative and he continued being active for several years as the union's grievance officer.[102] The union's intersectional approach to union organizing drew the loyalty of women and men, especially racial minorities and low-paid workers. Male workers like Bennett and Noble took leadership positions because they committed themselves to the ongoing struggle. They did so because they recognized the interlocking oppressions faced by all of those "on the bottom." Remarkably compared to many of their male peers, they were willing and even eager to fight alongside a predominantly female leadership.

UWU-I struggled to keep its membership intact in the later years of the 1970s and eventually decided to dissolve itself and 're-enter' WFSE. A number of factors contributed to this decision: over time, many leading members left UW including Monica Hill and Henry Noble. In 1976, Noble transferred from the Computing Center to the nearby Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center. Though he continued to assist campus organizing, he also helped organized an independent union at his new workplace starting in 1979.[103] In 1978, Hill, now an experienced member of both FSP and RW, was sent to organize a Radical Women chapter in Los Angeles. Alaniz, who had graduated from the University of Washington, went to work for the City of Seattle. The union also faced a declining number of rank-and-file members. Internal documents show that it had 75 dues-paying members in October 1974 and 76 in the following February. By November, a phone tree showed just 53 members. A membership list, likely from

[102] "Sit-in succeeds: United Workers' demands met." *UW Daily*, January 15, 1974, 1.

[103] Noble helped organize the Hutchinson Center Staff Association, an independent union which utilized the National Labor Relations Board process. After initially winning recognition as an independent, it sought to affiliate with United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) in 1984. The NLRB forced the union to conduct a new vote and it was surprisingly defeated 105-108. This led to the immediate dissolution of the bargaining unit. Gilbert, Helen. "Union leader scores against cancer center" *Freedom Socialist*, Autumn 1984 (Vol. 9, No 1).

the same period, shows approximately 50 members.[104] In January 1977, the union distributed only 41 membership cards. Final UWU-I president Lois Harris (Danks) described the union as "'bare bones' personnel-wise." in April 1980.[105]

One of the union's final public actions was a grievance filed to support telephone switchboard operators. In early 1980, UWU-I discussed formalizing and applying to represent these workers as a formal bargaining unit. This group of women workers had long been a stronghold of the union. Rather than moving forward with a plan to formalize a bargaining unit, Lois Harris wrote that it "decided to go ahead with this grievance full-speed and put our plans for a bargaining unit on the back burner for a while due to lack of people power and the fact that conditions are so bad that we must do something to slow down the turnover enough to even keep a few members there."[106] The grievance documented 50 labour violations in the department and named two supervisors, one of whom was former SROC steering committee member Yvette Winters. In June, they won the grievance and both supervisors were removed from their positions.[107]

As WFSE itself fought for policies which United Workers had previously championed, the two former enemies found themselves on the same side of a number of key issues. As early as 1975, Monica Hill wrote:

> WFSE's leaflets now call for Affirmative Action and childcare. More women and minorities are in the leadership of the WFSE campus local than ever before. When United

[104] United Workers Union-Independent, "Membership List," "Press and Correspondence 1977-1980," 1977, Box 8, Folder 6, United Workers Union-Independent records, 1973-1980, University of Washington Special Collections.

[105] Lois Harris (Danks) to Guerry Hodderson, "Membership List," "Press and Correspondence 1977-1980," April 1, 1980, Box 8, Folder 6, United Workers Union-Independent records, 1973-1980, University of Washington Special Collections.

[106] Lois Harris (Danks) to Guerry Hodderson, "Membership List,"

[107] Craig Tomashoff, "UW operators win battle; minor war continues" *UW Daily*, June 6, 1980, 6.

> Workers was waging a broad campaign for across-the-board raises instead of percentage raises, our members inside WFSE persuaded the local to support it, despite opposition at the council level. The increasing pressure for union democracy in WFSE is a direct result of United Workers' principled, open intervention.[108]

In April 1978, the two unions joined together to advocate for across-the-board raises at the HEP Board. Whereas UWU-I had campaigned for a $200 raise in 1975, the two unions sought just a $50 raise in 1978. When the Board voted in favour of the traditional percentage-worth.aises, both WFSE and UWU-I were very critical of the board's structure and called for an overhaul to university labour relations.[109] Lois Harris (Danks), the union's final president, recalls that "other unions were starting to pick up the 9 to 5 stuff and starting to take up more of the things we were fighting/pushing them on just because of the times."[110] Younger officers in WFSE replaced the "old school bureaucrats" which UWU-I had previously battled, and they were more willing "to take a stand on things like comparable worth." She summed it up stating "I think we merged back into WFSE because we were having an impact and it was changing a little. It was worth going back in there and fighting inside the union."[111]

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[108] Monica Hill, *Why Independent Unions?* Radical Women Publications: 1975.

[109] "HEP Board denies across the board pay increases," *The Daily of the University of Washington*, April 21, 1978.

[110] The 9 to 5 movement and the accompanying film was a growing movement of women office workers who challenged patriarchal norms in the workplace and the labour movement. See Chapter 5 for more details.

[111] Lois Danks, interviewed by Thomas MacMillan, July 10, 2024.

Chapter 3

Self-Organization, the United Legal Workers of California (ULWC), and the San Francisco Bay Area Women's Movement in the 1970s

> We are very excited about this conference, which will emphasize self-organizing at the workplace. The need for such organizing is all too apparent at this time since many traditional unions are failing to respond to the needs and concerns of rank and file members as well as the unorganized segments of our society. - Union Women's Alliance to Gain Equality (WAGE), October 1975[1]

Five hundred women traveled from as far away as Los Angeles, Seattle, Vancouver to sit in an unheated San Francisco high school gymnasium. It was early November 1975 and, despite cool temperatures and a poor-quality sound system, women labour organizers were eager to share their experiences and to engage in conversations with others. Joyce Maupin, keynote speaker and conference co-organizer, described attendees as "the people who are doing the work."[2] Attendees represented a wide array of organizations, and some were part of no organization at all; rank and file caucuses in mainstream unions, independent unions, women's organizations, and individuals simply interested in learning more about organizing were all present. This conference, sponsored by Union Women's Alliance to Gain Equality (Union WAGE), was one of several held that year to mark the United Nations' International Women's Year. Focused on sharing organizing stories as well as practical tips for effective union organizing and governance, it illustrates the core themes of the feminist union movement, including self-management, distrust of and/or disappointment with the male-led union movement, and a desire to force organized labour to represent "women's work."

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[1] Joyce Maupin to RESIST, October 5, 1975, "Organize" Conference 1975, Box 3, Folder 9, *Union WAGE (Women's Alliance To Gain Equality) records, 1971-1982*, Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University.

[2] Joyce Maupin. "Union Women's Alliance to Gain Equality (Union Wage) 1975 Working Women's Conference" Labor Archives and Research Center, November 8, 1975. http://archive.org/details/csfst_000041

Union WAGE was an activist non-profit organization which sought to bridge the worlds of organized labour and women's liberation. The embryo which grew into WAGE formed on March 8, 1971 (International Women's Day) when longtime socialists and trade unionists Anne Draper and Jean Maddox connected in the women's room during the National Organization of Women's (NOW) conference at the University of California, Berkeley. Appalled by the lack of involvement in the conference by working women, the two called for an impromptu lunchtime meeting, which attracted 36 attendees, and the organization was founded shortly thereafter.[3] WAGE was the driving force behind the conference and the group had played a vital role as a promoter of these values, connecting widely dispersed women worker-organizers with badly needed information and funding since its establishment four years prior.

Following proclamations by the United Nations, major international women's conferences were organized around the world, with the two most well-known held in Mexico City and East Berlin. Representing both the Western and Soviet blocs, thousands of governmental delegates and activists from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) debated the societal place of women and passed declarations on how to improve their conditions at each conference. The women's movement in the United States also answered the call, holding multiple widely attended conferences. Union WAGE's November conference was one of several socialist-feminist and working women's conferences held across the United States. In April 1975, a West Coast Conference of Socialist-Feminist Organizations in San Francisco was attended by approximately 200 members of nine socialist-feminist organizations from

[3] Diane Balser, *Sisterhood & Solidarity: Feminism and Labor in Modern Times,* Boston: South End Press, 1987, 88.

Washington state, Oregon, and California.[4] In July, the New American Movement and various women's groups sponsored a national conference on socialist-feministm at Antioch College near Dayton, Ohio.[5] These conferences, like those occurring around the world, attracted wide swathes of the women's movement in the United States and reflected a growing level of organization and optimism in the working women's movement as a whole.

This chapter argues that a diverse array of groups were established in the Bay Area which sought to assist women organize unions which were self-run, democratic, and responsive to the unique needs of women workers. Union WAGE, a national organization which made its biggest impact in the Bay Area, was at the epicentre of this diverse ecosystem of feminist worker-organizers and organizations. Though its leaders were most familiar with the centralizing tendencies of the Old Left, the organization channeled the key values which many New Left activists held most dearly, especially the concepts of participatory democracy and local control. Conferences played a key role in transmitting these ideas and strategies across the West Coast. Many attendees had already been inspired to form new, often independent unions which embodied those values. One important manifestation of this feminist and social justice-inspired unionism occurred at California Rural Legal Assistance (CRLA). Backed by the working women's movement and the United Farm Workers union, the United Legal Workers of California (ULWC) and their majority Chicana clerical worker members, challenged an otherwise progressive organization on its toxic male-centric working culture and served as a vanguard for clerical and women workers in non-profits and legal services.

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[4] Berkeley-Oakland Women's Unions, "Report on the West Coast Conference of Socialist Feminist Organizations" Box 2, Folder 8, Jan Arnold (Women's Alliance To Gain Equality) records, 1971-1982, Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University.

[5] Kristen Ghodsee, "Revisiting the United Nations decade for women: Brief reflections on feminism, capitalism and Cold War politics in the early years of the international women's movement" *Women's Studies International Forum* Vol 33, Issue 1, January–February 2010, 3-12.

Scholars of the working women's movement in California have paid an insufficient amount of attention to independent working women's organizations until recently. Prior to this chapter, the most recent book-length investigation into the large ecosystem of union reformers and organizers occurred in Diane Balser's 1987 book *Sisterhood & Solidarity: Feminism and Labor in Modern Times*. Written in the aftermath of the defeat of electoral feminism by Ronald Reagan in 1984, Balser's research sought to examine the long history of the women's movement and organized labour in the United States. She seeks to understand how women can take political power and use it to change society by examining three labour advocacy groups established by labour movement women.[6] While Balser's approach provides a wide-ranging look at the subject, this chapter focuses primarily on organizing at the union level. As such, it provides a more granular view of feminist workplace organizing which incorporates both archival research and oral history. This investigation seeks to blend investigation of advocacy groups like Union Women's Alliance to Gain Equality (WAGE) and the Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW) with an emphasis on new workplace organizing. More recently, Jennifer L. Pierce published two articles which focus on the organizing of and by feminist unions in the 1960s and 1970s in California. Pierce focuses on clerical workers at the University of California, Berkeley and their fight for comparable worth (pay equity) as well as their efforts against patriarchy and racism.[7] Her emphasis on the workplace organizing of clerical workers is crucial and this study expands on these articles to include other "pink-collar" workers in the Bay Area who worked in the private sector. By examining the ties between different facets of the feminist union

[6] Balser, 13.

[7] Jennifer L. Pierce. ""Fed Up": A Clerical Workers' Manifesto Sparks a Comparable-Worth Campaign at the University of California at Berkeley, 1970–1974." *Journal of Women's History* 36, no. 3 (2024): 118-138 and Jennifer L. Pierce. "'"We Were Democracy Mad:" Clerical Workers' Unionism, Antiracism, and Feminism at the University of California, Berkeley, 1966–1972." *International Labor and Working-Class History* 102 (2022): 181-199.

movement, this chapter seeks balance between workplace-centric studies and broader investigations of organizations which advocate outside of the office floor.

In the months prior to the 1975 conference, WAGE observed that there was "a great deal of excitement in the women's movement about independent organizing" because working women "are turned off by the bureaucracy, corruption and sexism of the big internationals."[8] The group pointed to a number of developments across California and the rest of the United States. In Boston, women workers formed the Independent Restaurant Workers Union (IRWU) in 1973, which won contracts at several area restaurants despite intense opposition.[9] Other examples included the United Workers Union - Independent (UWU-I) in Seattle, Pasadena's independent clerical worker union which defeated AFSCME by a vote of 141 to 43 "because of the sexist attitudes of the [AFSCME] organizer," as well as other organizing in Chicago, the 9 to 5 movement in Boston, and beyond.[10] To capture this energy, a conference, titled "Organize: A Working Women's Conference" was planned for later that year. Scheduled for two days, attendees travelled from British Columbia, Washington state, and across California to San Francisco's Benjamin Franklin High School.[11] Most of the organizing work for the conference was done by Union WAGE members, though it was also co-sponsored by the Berkeley/Oakland

[8] "Untitled" Data Center: Union WAGE Independent Unions. Box 9, Folder 8, Union WAGE (Women's Alliance To Gain Equality) records, 1971-1982, Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University.

[9] Ruth Flaherty, "Women Workers Take the Lead: The History and Legacy of the Independent Restaurant Workers Union" (M.A. thesis, University of Massachusetts at Amherst, 2002).

[10] "Untitled" Data Center: Union WAGE Independent Unions. Box 9, Folder 8, Union WAGE (Women's Alliance To Gain Equality) records, 1971-1982, Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University.

[11] Joyce Maupin. "Union Women's Alliance to Gain Equality (Union Wage) 1975 Working Women's Conference" Labor Archives and Research Center, November 8, 1975. http://archive.org/details/csfst_000041.

Women's Union and the San Francisco Women's Union.[12] Among the speakers were representatives of the feminist unions discussed in other chapters, specifically the Service, Office, Retail Workers Union of Canada (SORWUC), Association of University and College Employees (AUCE), and the United Workers Union-Independent (UWU-I). Feminist organizers of other independent and affiliated unions also shared their stories.

Emblematic of the financial struggles of not only WAGE but virtually all socialist-feminist organizations, conference organizers decided not to pay to heat the gym in order to reduce the rental cost. Moreover, their volunteer sound engineers were women in training at local radio station KPFA. Board member and civil rights activist Chude Pamela Allen later recalled that "nobody checked the speakers; they hadn't worked for years. [laughs] So we get there, first day of a conference with 500 people—women—not only is it freezing cold, but we have no microphones."[13] Nonetheless, over four hours of conference speeches were recorded and preserved.[14] The conference's speeches provide a remarkable record of the diverse perspectives of women worker-organizers. One of the most forceful voices in favour of independence was Flossie Morris, a leader of the Oakland chapter of the National Alliance of Postal and Federal Employees. She described her union's desire to be independent as "a matter of life and death." The National Alliance is a union of African-American postal workers, which had been founded in the Jim Crow South when white mainstream unions excluded Black members. Though

[12] These groups were autonomous socialist-feminist organizations with an interest in labour alongside other issues of women's liberation. "WAGE Exec. Board Minutes," October 6, 1975, Box 1, Folder 6, Union WAGE (Women's Alliance To Gain Equality) records, 1971-1982, Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University.

[13] Chude Pamela Allen, "Chude Pamela Allen: The Political is Personal" conducted by Amanda Tewes in 2020-2021, Oral History Center, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2022. 182.

[14] "Union Women's Alliance to Gain Equality (Union WAGE) 1975 Working Women's Conference" Labor Archives and Research Center, November 8, 1975. http://archive.org/details/csfst_000041

discrimination in the postal service was officially banned in 1962, she argued that AFL-CIO unions continued to practice nepotism in favour of white male workers. She believed that "the enemy in our case is AFL-CIO and I want to make that clear. If you are a worker, please don't get tricked off into what I consider to be a male, white, elite concept."[15] While criticism of the AFL-CIO and/or the male-led mainstream labour movement was prevalent in virtually every conference speech, not every group was critical of mainstream labour. Clerical workers employed by the state of California initially organized independently, forming the Clerical & Allied Services Employees (CASE). They eventually hired three members as organizers but hit a wall because of the need to both work full-time and raise families. This led the union to seek affiliation with a mainstream union. After being approached by a half dozen, the union eventually signed a two-year trial agreement with AFSCME because "it was in the public sector and promised that we might keep our integrity and made available to us monies to recruit membership." As worker-organizer Charma Kapersky told the audience, the large mainstream public sector union "has helped us to grow and we hope that someday we may be able to make money available to organize other workers." She sought to push back on the anti-mainstream labour sentiments of other organizers, stating "I've heard some anti-organized labour statements today. [However,] their assistance has been vital to my union."[16]

Reactions from Bay Area groups were mixed and largely broke down along existing ideological lines. The women's movement was largely supportive with PLEXUS, a radical feminist Bay Area newspaper, publishing a summary of the conference's events, describing the

[15] Flossie Morris. "Union Women's Alliance to Gain Equality (Union Wage) 1975 Working Women's Conference" Labor Archives and Research Center, November 8, 1975. http://archive.org/details/csfst_000041

[16] Charma Kapersky, "Union Women's Alliance to Gain Equality (Union WAGE) 1975 Working Women's Conference" Labor Archives and Research Center, November 8, 1975. http://archive.org/details/csfst_000041

two-day event as focused on "Nitty-Gritty Unionizing."[17] The Communist Party's *People's World* wrote a broadly supportive report on the conference, noting that CPUSA supporter Geraldine Johnson, a Black women and trade unionist in the Bay Area, spoke on the conference's second day about the International Women's Year World Conference which had been held in East Berlin just a month prior. However, on the issue of independent unions, the newspaper was less supportive, writing that "one AFSCME member was pleased with the chance to hear about successful organizing drives, but said the discussion on independence versus affiliation was not thorough enough and that the conference lacked direction."[18] This criticism aligned with their official party policy of championing efforts to reform existing labour unions rather than start separate ones.

Freedom Socialist Party / Radical Women, which had representatives at the conference from two feminist independent unions, wrote that they were "cordially invited" and "warmly welcomed and well-treated" while in attendance.[19] However, the groups found the experience to be "generally disappointing because it lacked political orientation and strategic direction…" They described themselves as the conference's "defacto [sic] leadership" because they "infused socialist feminist politics and the lessons of our union experiences into the proceedings, and explained the power of independent unions as one tactic for disgruntled minority and women workers."[20] FSP was critical of what they perceived as the conference's "nonpolitical unionistic philosophy." Contributing to this position may have been the fact that their resolution, which

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[17] Peggy Bennett, "Nitty-Gritty Unionizing," PLEXUS, Vol 2, No 9, December 1975, 1.

[18] "Organizing working women" *People's World*, November 22, 1975, 8.

[19] These groups, discussed in more depth in chapter X, are Seattle-based groups which originated in the women's liberation movement of the late 1960s; they uniquely synthesize socialist-feminist and Trotskyist ideas. Gloria Martin *Socialist Feminism: The First Decade 1966-76, Freedom Socialist Publications* [1978; 1986].

[20] Martin, Gloria. *Socialist Feminism: The First Decade, 1966-76*, 71-72.

would have had the conference endorse independent unions, was not discussed following a vote of attendees. Decrying other groups for holding what they deemed syndicalist views which were "antipolitical and anti-vanguard party," FSP/RW believed that WAGE's leadership were ex-radicals, which made them "helpless to provide the necessary leadership to the very women who look to them for answers."[21] The groups wrote that "we earnestly hope its leadership will some day awaken to the need for injecting radical politics into Union WAGE. Without this perspective, the group is doomed to sterility and disintegration."[22] While reaction to the conference on the far-left was mixed, many participants from the women's movement were inspired by the focus on integrating working class politics with feminism.

Critics, including proponents of both affiliated and independent unions, noted that the conference lacked a strong political direction. This reflected the divided position within Union WAGE (and the larger labour and women's movements) on the question. Unlike Leninist political parties practicing democratic centralism, Union WAGE emphasized broad shared values and common goals rather than adherence to a strict party line. Both members and individual chapters were divided on the question. Initially, WAGE was only open to women who were members of mainstream unions. However, in 1974, the group opened membership to include all working women, regardless of union status. This included homemakers and others excluded from organized labour. Allen recalled that the change was made "because the other focus of the organization was to get women workers into unions, to organize the unorganized. And they realized it was a contradiction to only limit the membership to people who were already in

[21] Martin, Gloria. *Socialist Feminism*, 71-72.

[22] Martin, Gloria. *Socialist Feminism*, 71-72.

unions, if their goal was to bring in the unorganized."[23] The 1975 conference revealed a division within the organization. According to Allen, the "Old Guard" members, including co-founders Jean Maddox and Joyce Maupin, "were really interested in independent working women's associations, because of this question of trusteeship." Those she described as "union women," i.e. WAGE members with strong ties to rank-and-file reform caucuses in the mainstream labour movement, were opposed to including independent groups. The internal debate, which should have occurred prior to the conference, did not happen because WAGE's vice-president Kay Eisenhower was away planning her wedding, which was mistakenly scheduled for the conference's first day.[24] At the 1976 WAGE convention, the organization was again unable to find agreement and sent the question back to their chapters for further discussion. The convention report promised that "the question of independent unions versus affiliation with the existing trade union movement will be a primary issue of next year's convention."[25] At the 1977 convention, two competing resolutions were rejected as "restrictive and therefore not in keeping with Union WAGE's purpose and goals." One resolution called for independent unions to affiliate in order to "to achieve strength and protect its members." The other called for the group to support "the building of politically independent, pro-socialist unions of the currently unorganized."[26]As Diane Balser wrote, "rather than choosing one strategy over another, Union WAGE's policy then became to give individuals and groups information about *all* of the different possibilities. WAGE itself became a resource center that offered appropriate help,

[23] Allen, interview.

[24] Allen, interview.

[25] "WAGE Moves Forward," *Union WAGE*, November-December 1976, 3.

[26] "WAGE Convention," *Union WAGE,* January-February 1977, 14.

rather than a place where much organizing was initiated. This was true particularly in its later years."[27] This compromise was necessary to keep the group from splitting into rival factions.

One major concern of conference attendees, and the working women's movement more broadly, was the threat of trusteeships. In labour relations, a trusteeship is a common mechanism which allows central leadership to take control over an affiliate or local for a specific purpose. These purposes commonly cover a wide range of issues, including alleged corruption and political misalignment with the national body. Trade union governance has often been compared to that of a military organization or a nation whose sovereignty is under threat; one scholar wrote in 1959 that "the governments of national unions are sovereign powers like the governments of nations."[28] Local groups and individual members opposed to a union's existing leadership were usually expelled and/or sanctioned. Clyde Summers, a lawyer with the American Civil Liberties Union and a career advocate for union democracy, wrote in 1991 that "unions' use of trusteeships…has often been abusive, with the very purpose of curbing opposition groups at the local level and reinforcing dictatorial control by national officers."[29] One of the most well-known examples of this struggle occurred in the United Mine Workers of America (UMW). Despite the passage of the Labor Management Reporting and Disclosure Act of 1959 (LMRDA), which was a federal law intended to guarantee the democratic rights of union members, nineteen of the UMW's twenty-three districts "were run by appointed rather than elected officials" prior to 1964. In that year, the U.S. Department of Labor sued UMW to force the termination of the trusteeships. What amounted to mini-dictatorships imposed by the international executive

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[27] Balser, 141.

[28] William M. Leiserson, *American Trade Union Democracy*, Columbia University Press, 1959, 76.

[29] Clyde W. Summers, "Union Trusteeships and Union Democracy," *University of Michigan Journal of Law Reform* 24, no. 3 & 4 (Spring/Summer 1991): 689-708.

reflected a deep level of corruption that eventually led to the murder of reformer Jock Yablonski on December 31, 1969 and the overhaul of the entire union by the 'Miners for Democracy' movement.[30] Herman Benson, a machinist and member of the Socialist Party of America, founded a newsletter in 1959 which highlighted efforts to win democracy within mainstream unions. This later became a national organization called the Association for Union Democracy.[31] Left-wing elements of the labour movement who sought to reform existing unions decried trusteeships and thus shared much in common with the feminist women's movement.

Despite the LMRDA regulating the use of trusteeships, there was still a widespread concern about their usage among union activists. WAGE co-founder Jean Maddox had firsthand experience with this issue, as she was a leader in her Local when trusteeship was repeatedly imposed on it. Maddox was part of a reform slate which won control over the executive of Local 29 of the Office and Professional Employees Union (OPEIU). An active participant in the 1947 AFL-CIO purge of left-wing activists, OPEIU's leadership continued collaborating with the FBI for decades thereafter. In the late 1960s, Jean Maddox organized a reform slate which defeated anti-communist activist John Kinnick for control of the local executive. The caucus was multi-racial, left-leaning, and focused on rank-and-file democracy. However, after it paid the bail of radical Angela Davis, anti-communist national union leaders began to red-bait the elected leadership once again. When the secretary-treasurer of 15 years was voted out in February 1973, OPEIU international president Howard Coughlin imposed trusteeship the following day due to alleged "irregularities" in the voting process. Over the next several years, a back-and-forth between the reformers and international leadership led to the imposition of trusteeship on two

[30] Joseph J. Klock. Democracy in the UMW?" Palzer, *Doris Labor Law Journal*; (October 1, 1974), 627.

[31] Herman Benson, *Rebels, Reformers, & Racketeers: How Insurgents Transformed The Labor Movement*. (Brooklyn, Association for Union Democracy, 2004).

more occasions. Maddox died from cancer in early 1976 while Local 29 was still in trusteeship. Jean Maddox had previously written that "union members must fight to get trustee-ship language out of their constitutions and stop this rule from the top down. Then internationsl (sic) will serve only in advisory capacity."[32] In a multi-page interrogation of the issue in the November-December edition of *Union WAGE*, Jean Maddox warned that "the number of active trusteeships has risen sharply from a low of fewer than 200 trusteeships in 1962 to a total of 351 in 1972."[33] One potential solution to the threat of trusteeship was that of secession and/or independence. This option was most vocally encouraged during the November 1975 conference by union members who were also part of the Freedom Socialist Party and Radical Women, both based in Seattle.

Fear of interference by established union leaders was repeated by speakers from both the United Workers Union-Independent and the Staff Association Pierce County Public Library Union. Both of these unions competed with SEIU and AFSCME for influence in their respective institutions, with the SEIU in particular often being accused of using trusteeships to intimidate independent-minded and left-leaning locals.[34] Conference speeches by Tamara Turner and Yolanda Alaniz emphasized the threat of trusteeships. Turner, a librarian in the Pierce County, Washington Public Library, told attendees that marginalized workers could not look to “the entrenched bureaucrats running traditional unions” for solutions, stating “...if the needs of your particular group are different or you want to move faster” [than international union leadership],

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[32] Jean Maddox; The Fight For Rank And File Democracy. Berkeley: Union WAGE, 1976.

[33] Jean Maddox, “TRUSTEESHIP: Roadblock to Union Democracy,” *Union WAGE* (November-December 1975), 1.

[34] Two prominent books on this topic include. Early, Steve. *The civil wars in US labor: Birth of a new workers' movement or death throes of the old?*. Chicago, Haymarket Books, 2011 and Winslow, Cal, *Labor's Civil War in California: The NUHW Healthcare Workers' Rebellion,* (Oakland: PM Press 2010).

your chances of being thrown into trusteeship or refused strike sanctions" were very high.[35] Alaniz, a clerical worker at the University of Washington in Seattle, argued that her union, UWU-I, refused to join the local AFSCME branch in part "because we do not want any strings attached to bureaucratically run unions. We can't say that word too much. They will hold us back. No national can put us into receivership as they have done [to] other militant locals."[36] The threat of an anti-militant trusteeship was a factor for many feminist union activists which encouraged them to form and maintain independent unions rather than affiliation.

ULWC

While the threat of trusteeship kept some predominantly women's unions from considering affiliation, the United Legal Workers of California (ULWC) were rejected by every union that they sought out. Nonetheless, the legal secretaries and clerical workers who formed the new union wrote to readers of *Union WAGE* that:

> for the last eight months, we've been telling people that it's possible to organize your own independent union and negotiate your own contract. But to ourselves, we've often expressed doubts about those possibilities. Today, however, we can say it's more than possible. We've done it![37]

The process of organizing, negotiating, and defending their first two contracts brought to light the contradictions which feminist union organizing so often faced: in otherwise progressive organizations, left-leaning male leaders were pitted against female clerical workers who sought to combat sexism, low wages, overwork, and arbitrary governance. The United Legal Workers of California (ULWC), an independent union with a headquarters in San Francisco, represented

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[35] Tamara Turner, "Union Women's Alliance to Gain Equality (Union WAGE) 1975 Working Women's Conference" Labor Archives and Research Center, November 8, 1975. http://archive.org/details/csfst_000041

[36] Yolanda Alaniz, "Union Women's Alliance to Gain Equality (Union WAGE) 1975 Working Women's Conference" Labor Archives and Research Center, November 8, 1975. http://archive.org/details/csfst_000041

[37] "Legal Workers Negotiate Contract" *Union WAGE*, March-April 1976, 11.

approximately 60 legal secretaries and clerical staff employed by the California Rural Legal Assistance (CLRA). The CRLA had twelve small offices, most of which were in agricultural towns in central and northern California.[38] A public interest legal non-profit founded with funding from the 'War on Poverty,' CRLA had deep ties to farmworkers and fought against discrimination, including sexism, alongside its clients. However, when it came to the experiences of its clerical workers, many reported incidents of sexual harassment and violence in the workplace. The ULWC was an early leader in the unionization of legal workers, particularly those who worked for anti-poverty legal organizations like CRLA. The union's initial organizing drive was "magically successful and rapid" and negotiations produced a first contract that provided vast improvements to working conditions and benefits. However, due to a combination of federal budget cuts and CRLA's leadership being unhappy with having to work within a union contract for clerical workers, a tougher approach was adopted by management. This provoked a 10-week strike which saw picket line crossing by otherwise pro-labour lawyers. ULWC's picket lines drew the attention of the powerful United Farm Workers. With the support of Union WAGE, other Bay Area feminists, and the United Farm Workers, the United Legal Workers of California signed a second collective agreement which maintained many of the improvements which had been won in their first contract. The effort also pushed ULWC toward affiliation, which led them to join the newly formed National Organization of Legal Service Workers. The experiences of these clerical workers and their allies struggling against an anti-poverty legal aid organization demonstrate the uncomfortable position of Bay Area feminist unionists who looked to both the women's movement and sympathetic segments of male organized labour in order to challenge patriarchy and embrace class struggle.

[38] Mary Ann Massenburg. "The CRLA Experience in Secretarial Training," Clearinghouse Review 13, no. 1, May 1979, 69-70.

The California Rural Legal Assistance formed following the passage of the Economic Opportunities Act of 1964, a landmark law which provided funding to the anti-poverty programs put forth by President Lyndon Johnson. In May 1966, it received a $1.2 million operational grant from the Office of Economic Opportunity and its first service office opened in August of that year.[39] CRLA's founding meeting was attended by farmworker union leaders Cesar Chavez and Larry Itliong and the CRLA for decades had a close working relationship with organized labour as well as the Black Power Movement. CRLA provided legal assistance to California's predominantly Mexican and Filipino farmworkers, including those who struggled against sexual discrimination, ethnic bigotry, and unsafe working conditions. No one was more crucial to the establishment of CRLA than James Lorenz. He was the founder and first initial director and his views reflected the progressive and middle-class nature of the organization. He argued in 1968 that "most of us, whether lawyers, law students, or legal secretaries are middle-class people...We may speak for the poor, but we can not share their perceptions."[40] The CRLA's primary role was to defend the legal rights of indigent farmworkers and it won multiple high-impact cases, including those which ended the controversial Bracero program and significantly improved working and living conditions for farmworkers.[41] Since its establishment, CRLA's attorneys were well-regarded in liberal and left-wing circles and they were known for defending indigent farmworkers against agro-business as well as engaging in fierce battles with Governor Ronald

[39] Michael Bennett and Cruz Reynoso. "California rural legal assistance (CRLA): Survival of a poverty law practice," *Chicano Law Review* 1 (1972): 2.

[40] James Lorenz, "Lawyers, Law, and the Poor," *Guild Practitioner* 27, no. 4 (Fall 1968): 192.

[41] Doug Genens. "Fighting Poverty in the Fields: Legal Services and the War on Poverty in Rural California." *Agricultural History* 94, no. 2 (2020): 251-278.

Reagan's conservative agenda.[42] Though the organization was strongly supportive of the United Farm Workers and other efforts to improve the working conditions for their indigent clients, its own clerical workers did not unionize until the formation of the United Legal Workers of California (ULWC) in the summer of 1975.

While the CRLA's public image was that of a progressive organization fighting for the human rights of marginalized workers and revolutionaries, many of its own lowest paid workers were planning their own uprising of sorts against management. The immediate impetus behind the formation of the ULWC were job-specific concerns but the effort was also part of a national movement which struggled to extend collective bargaining to legal services workers. Informal organizing among legal secretaries occurred in many cities such as Chicago, where a council was established. Objections to forced unpaid overtime, low pay, and a general lack of dignity on the job were central to the effort. As one Chicago legal secretary said, "Nearly all of our problems stem from the fact that we are female, and being a secretary is dismissed as 'women's work.' We're not considered a vital part of the labor force. We're all supposed to be looking for husbands or working for 'pocket money."[43] In October 1973, legal secretaries and clerical workers employed by a Southern California law firm petitioned to form a union and affiliate with the International Brotherhood of Teamsters. However, the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) blocked their certification by declining to assert jurisdiction over non-professional employees of a law firm.[44] The other issue preventing legal secretaries from organizing was

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[42] For his efforts, Democratic governor Jerry Brown appointed former CRLA director Cruz Reynoso to the California Supreme Court in 1982 as an associate justice, making him the first Chicano to hold that position.

[43] Nancy Banks. "Lawyers Are the Worst Snobs." Student Law 3 (1974): 6.

[44] The primary reasoning was that lawyer-client confidentiality was threatened by the affiliation of legal secretaries to an outside organization. The law firm represented several large union locals affiliated with the AFL-CIO. As such, the ongoing feud between the unaffiliated Teamsters and the AFL-CIO played a significant role in the court's decision. Robert D. Vogel, Labor Law—National Labor Relations Board Jurisdiction—Legal Services Have

whether legal services were considered "trade or commerce" and thus subject to antitrust laws. In June 1975, the United States Supreme Court clarified, in *Goldfarb v. Virginia State Bar*, that the practice of law was an act of trade or commerce, which opened the door for the NLRB to recognize collective bargaining for legal workers across the United States.[45] The lack of legal clarity and national organizing led to the formation of independent unions of legal service workers not only in California but in New York City, New Jersey, Detroit, Texas, and elsewhere.[46]

While the CRLA's founder believed the organizations' secretaries to be middle class like himself, by at least 1975, the staff in question felt different. That spring, CRLA's legal secretaries and bookkeepers were unexpectedly denied annual cost of living increases despite other groups of employees receiving them. Told that the only way to increase salaries was to lay off their co-workers, the group instead chose to unionize. Given the legal uncertainty of the aforementioned court cases, the legality of their unionization attempt was unclear. Nevertheless, worker-organizers discovered that not only were they being underpaid but a culture of overwork was prevalent, with some employees being forced to work 8.5 hours a day while only paid 7.5. Lunch breaks were frequently denied, and they were regularly required to work unpaid overtime. Another factor which drove unionization was a major incident of sexual harassment in the workplace. Though it was not publicized during the initial organizing drive, ULWC later wrote in *Union WAGE* about a moment where a male CRLA attorney "angry at something a clerical

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Insufficient Effect on Interstate Commerce to Justify Exercise of NLRB Jurisdiction—Bodle, Fogel, Julber, Reinhardt & Rothschild, 206 N.L.R.B. No. 60, CCH 1973 Lab. L. Rep. 25,863 (October 23, 1973), 7 Loy. L.A. L. Rev. 385 (1974). Available at: https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/llr/vol7/iss2/8

[45] Rose Sloan. "NLRB Asserts Jurisdiction over Law Firms as a Class - Potential Limitations," *Southwestern University Law Review* 11, no. 2 (1979): 691-712.

[46] Stavitsky, Bruce J. "Lawyer Unionization in Quasi-Governmental Public and Private Sectors," *California Western Law Review* 17, no. 1 (1980-1981), (55-74).

worker had done--grabbed her breast and squeezed it as she sat at her desk in the busy reception area. He told her if she ever did it again, he would twist the other one off."[47] She later discussed the incident with other women in the office and then she reported it to the director. However, he "refused to deal with her complaint seriously." As word spread, "more clerical workers began to acknowledge that they had also been sexually harassed (patted or pinched by male co-workers as they walked through the office), but they had been too embarrassed and fearful to talk about it."[48] The harasser was eventually disciplined after word spread and more workers, clericals and attorneys, women and men, spoke against it. The ULWC described this incident as "a catalyst for organizing our union."[49] As was often the case with feminist unions, both financial improvements and issues of workplace dignity were at the core of their organizing.

Within two weeks of the initial meeting in Salinas, over 95% of potential members signed petitions seeking a representation election. Because of the legal uncertainty regarding clerical worker unions and a culture of new union organizing created by the United Farm Workers, the ULWC and CRLA were aided by the State Conciliator and agreed to an election held outside of the NLRB system.[50] In an August vote conducted by the California Agricultural Labor Relations Board, every potential member voted in favour of the union. After two subsequent meetings, during which a negotiating team was elected with representatives from across all twelve offices of the statewide organization.[51] Speaking just months after the union's

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[47] "Sexual Harassment in Legal Services: IT CAN HAPPEN HERE," *Union WAGE*, September-October 1977, 6.

[48] Union WAGE "Sexual Harassment in Legal Services: IT CAN HAPPEN HERE."

[49] Union WAGE "Sexual Harassment in Legal Services: IT CAN HAPPEN HERE."

[50] Union WAGE, "Legal Workers Negotiate Contract."

[51] Mary Massenburg, "Union Women's Alliance to Gain Equality (Union WAGE) 1975 Working Women's Conference"

formation, Mary Ann Massenburg told the WAGE conference that it had just completed a "kind of magically successful and rapid organizing drive."[52]

Nonetheless, the question as to whether an affiliated or independent union was best for ULWC was a pivotal one which arose during organizing. ULWC formed as an independent union for several reasons. As organizer Mary Ann Massenburg told the Union WAGE conference, the first priority was that "people felt very strongly about a democratic union and one that we could control ourselves." Secondly, the existing unions "available to us were not very satisfactory to us." Given the geographical dispersal and relatively small number of members across the vast state of California, neither was the bargaining unit "really attractive to too many existing unions either." ULWC was turned down by every union they contacted, including the existing independent union of community workers employed by CRLA. Community workers, who were usually male former farm workers, were hired to do community organizing for the organization. They were not interested in being in the same union as their women co-workers. At least four national mainstream unions also rejected them as well.[53] Another key issue was the refusal of the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) to recognize the legitimacy of collective bargaining in law offices and non-profit organizations. Because of this lack of national recognition and concerns about their status as recipients of federal grants, those who formed ULWC "decided it would be the fastest thing to organize an independent union." Rather than challenge the NLRB, organizers sought an election under the jurisdiction of

[52] Mary Massenburg, "Union Women's Alliance to Gain Equality (Union WAGE) 1975 Working Women's Conference" Labor Archives and Research Center, November 8, 1975. http://archive.org/details/csfst_000041

[53] Mainstream unions which turned down the ULWC's overtures included: OPEIU, SEIU, CWA, and District 65. Mary Ann Massenburg, interview with Thomas MacMillan, June 10, 2025.

the California State Mediation and Conciliation Service.[54] Just three months after filing for an election, ULWC was chosen unanimously by its potential members to represent them. Thus, the women who formed the ULWC chose an independent union for a combination of political, strategic, and practical reasons.

Negotiations began on a proposed contract which the state mediation services had helped ULWC write. The state conciliator also attended the first round of negotiations.[55] Massenburg recalled that,

> the hardest problem we ran into was getting the management team to take us seriously. Here [we] were, a group of secretaries who have the right to call negotiations. They were not really thrilled with that. The three member management team arrived to the first sessions of the negotiations with no notes, no pencils, nothing. Although we outlined our major demands, they just sat there for 3 days.[56]

The union later recalled that during the second negotiation session, "the management team took notes…[but] they later lost them and asked us to reconstruct what they had promised to do."[57] The timing of negotiations also aided the union. Martin Glick, who had served as director from 1972 to 1974, had recently left the organization.[58] The interim director was David Kirkpatrick, an established attorney who was believed to have radical sympathies. Kirkpatrick was highlighted in a speech to the United States Senate for having allegedly "worked closely

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[54] Mary Massenburg, "Union Women's Alliance to Gain Equality (Union WAGE) 1975 Working Women's Conference" Labor Archives and Research Center, November 8, 1975. http://archive.org/details/csfst_000041

[55] Union WAGE, "Legal Workers Negotiate Contract."

[56] Massenburg, Mary, "Union Women's Alliance to Gain Equality (Union WAGE) 1975 Working Women's Conference" Labor Archives and Research Center, November 8, 1975. http://archive.org/details/csfst_000041

[57] Union WAGE, "Legal Workers Negotiate Contract"

[58] Martin Glick, a civil rights attorney noted for successfully challenging California's frequent misplacement of Spanish-speaking students into special education, left his position as director in 1974. A colleague later described him as "a slender idealistic magna cum laude at Ohio State who saw his future as a tax lawyer…" Maurice Jourdane **"**California Rural Legal Assistance Celebrates Fifty Years" *Huffington Post Voices*, November 28, 2016. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/california-rural-legal-as_b_13285032

with Peace and Freedom party leader Fay Stender in furnishing prisoners with Communist and revolutionary literature."[59] Another factor highlighted by organizers was the support given by volunteer law students and labour lawyers affiliated with the National Lawyers Guild. Massenburg told the WAGE conference that "it seemed to be very intimidating to the management to have a group of people who were simply writing down everything they said."[60] The ULWC also fought on the reputational level, utilizing CRLA's reputation as "a fairly liberal to radical legal service," to win support and thus concessions in their first contract.[61]

Whether it was the support of volunteer lawyers and law students, management's pro-radical sympathies, fear of reputational damage, or their overall lack of preparation, the collective bargaining agreement signed in February 1976 was a remarkably pro-union first contract. Among the many improvements were "a 10% salary increase with higher increases at the bottom of the scale," full health and life insurance benefits for all employees who worked at least 15 hours a week, and a bonus payment for bilingual employees.[62] Much to the chagrin of management, the contract created a grievance policy which provided for an outside arbitrator's involvement in all grievances and limited costs to the union for arbitration.[63] It also gave the union the right to deny whether a federally-funded CETA (Comprehensive Employment and

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[59] Paul Fannin, "A Catalog of Legal Aid Horrors," January 24, 1974, *Senate Congressional Record*, 748.

[60] Mary Massenburg, "Union Women's Alliance to Gain Equality (Union WAGE) 1975 Working Women's Conference" Labor Archives and Research Center, November 8, 1975. http://archive.org/details/csfst_000041.

[61] Mary Massenburg, "Union Women's Alliance to Gain Equality (Union WAGE) 1975 Working Women's Conference" Labor Archives and Research Center, November 8, 1975. http://archive.org/details/csfst_000041.

[62] This bonus payment was especially important given that many union members were Chicana and CRLA served a primarily Spanish-speaking clientele. Union WAGE, "Legal Workers Negotiate Contract."

[63] The grievance procedure was later the greatest sticking point in the 1978 negotiations.

Training Act) worker could be employed in any position that fell within the jurisdiction of the ULWC bargaining agreement.[64]

Despite their geographic dispersal, ULWC's membership remained engaged following the contract signing and fought to maintain these improvements. In October 1976, ULWC complained of retaliation and union-busting tactics by CRLA management when union president Bessie Gallardo was demoted "after filing a grievance to clarify her contractual rights to perform her role as a Union officer."[65] Management complained that union officers like Gallardo spent too much time attending to union matters during work hours. Another example of the level of union influence over certain CRLA practices occurred in May 1977. In that month's meeting, membership debated whether CRLA needed to hire a library aide, what its potential job description would be, and, if hired, whether that position would be part of their bargaining unit. The meeting concluded with members giving cautious assent to the library aide position, after which management immediately sent a memorandum notifying the union that they had also approved the union-backed library aide job description.[66] Given the shift in power from highly-educated white male attorneys to less-formally educated mainly Chicana clerical workers, this level of influence over what are usually deemed "management rights" was bound to be at the core of the next contract negotiation.

CRLA management took a very different approach to the second negotiations. The organization's top leadership positions were now held by newcomers Alberto Saldamando and

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[64] Union WAGE, "Legal Workers Negotiate Contract."

[65] United Legal Workers of California, October 31, 1976, "Delano Dumps Due Process," ULWC Correspondence, 1978. Record Group 3, Box 234, Folder 1, *California Rural Legal Assistance, Inc. records*, 1966-2000, Stanford University Manuscripts Division.

[66] United Legal Workers of California to Tom Miller, May 3, 1977, "RE: Position of "Library Aide," ULWC Correspondence, 1978. Record Group 3, Box 234, Folder 1, *California Rural Legal Assistance, Inc. records*, 1966-2000, Stanford University Manuscripts Division.

Tom Miller, both of whom had been hired during the first ULWC contract. Management also brought in William W. Miller to help with upcoming negotiations. William Miller was deputy director Tom Miller's father as well as an experienced management-labour attorney. A month prior to the beginning of negotiations, the elder Miller produced a confidential 26-page memo which called the existing contract "extremely bad, from the employer's point of view" and ominously warned that "probably this negotiation is the last time you will have a chance to change the contract."[67] He then provided a detailed list of suggested changes which sought to alter virtually every contract article. The memorandum acknowledged that "being tough" with the union could provoke a strike or push it to affiliate with a larger body, However, he maintained that "while these may be undesirable consequences, they are not as undesirable as the way you are operating now."[68] The memo argued that the ULWC's vision had extended beyond basic collective bargaining rights and he wanted to "encourage the Union to look to the [National Labor Relations Act] as the source of its power. This will make things more definite as we have an established body of law which makes things more predictable."[69] Battlelines were quickly drawn between the ULWC and management motivated to roll back improvements won in the first contract.

While William Miller, an outside attorney, wanted CRLA to take a hard line with ULWC, CRLA management recognized that it needed to be more cautious. Though management had decided that it could not tolerate an extension of the key features of the first contract, a strike threatened to undermine the organization's relationship with its clients in organized labour.

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[67] W.W. Miller to Alberto Saldamando and Tom Miller, November 30, 1977, "Memorandum" Record Group 3, Box 234, Folder 7, *California Rural Legal Assistance, Inc. records, 1966-2000*, Stanford University Manuscripts Division.

[68] W.W. Miller, "Memorandum."

[69] W.W. Miller, "Memorandum."

Moreover, staff lawyers were staunchly pro-union in their personal and professional orientations. If CRLA was perceived as being anti-union, management believed it would scare away its pro-union legal staffers and sour its relationship with Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers. Management was aware of its limited options and attempted to walk the tight line between overt union-busting and acquiescing to union demands. William Miller internally acknowledged this, writing "that CRLA is engaged in a political battle for the minds of its staff."[70] Starting in 1974, most of its funding came from the Legal Services Corporation, a newly-established bipartisan board appointed by the President. Faced with a federal government hostile to publicly-funded programs, CRLA also faced a $250,000 budget deficit at the start of the strike, which led it to close a special unit that provided legal assistance for the elderly. The reluctance of the Legal Services Corporation to increase their budget was blamed for the deficit.[71] A combination of logistical and political choices meant that a strike was virtually inevitable and perhaps desirable from management's point of view.

Negotiations for the second contract began in January 1978 and following expiration of the first contract on February 25. Negotiations broke down in early March, 1978, which led to the ULWC going on strike beginning on March 6 following a 52-6 vote. Some of CRLA's twleve offices shut down entirely while others stayed open with greatly reduced capacity. The primary disputes were over wages and the grievance procedure. On the first day of the strike, some lawyers briefly picketed alongside the striking clerical workers.[72] Lawyers who crossed ULWC picket lines were forced to do their own clerical work and no new clients were accepted.

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[70] William Miller to Alberto Saldamando (confidential), March 30, 1978, Record Group 3, Box 234, Folder 5, *California Rural Legal Assistance, Inc. records, 1966-2000*, Stanford University Manuscripts Division.

[71] "Rural Legal Aid Unit Hit Hard by Strike" *Los Angeles Times*, March 9, 1978, 4.

[72] "Legal staffers go on strike" *The Californian*, March 6, 1978, 12.

Because CRLA's staff attorneys were idealistic lawyers who were committed to defending marginalized rural workers, they were caught between supporting clerical workers, with whom they worked closely, and fulfilling their professional and moral obligations to their indigent clients. Throughout the strike, most lawyers continued working, often from home and/or returning to their offices after hours to avoid picket lines. Whether this counted as not crossing the picket line was disputed. However, almost immediately, a feeling of bitterness prevailed across the organization. After four days of the work stoppage, executive director Alberto Saldamando sent an all-staff memo stating "I have become increasingly concerned about what will happen to CRLA once the strike is over. The bitterness and animosity that has developed may continue long after the issues that led up to the strike are forgotten."[73] The issue of picket lines divided CRLA's attorneys, as Saldamando wrote that "some people within CRLA have decided to cross the picket line and many have not...We all have conflicting feelings. I would ask you to keep that in mind and not blame others who may not agree with you for not accepting your decision as their own."[74] The ULWC labelled staff attorneys as "closet scabs" for actively crossing their picket lines or by working from home.[75]

Throughout the dispute, Alberto Saldamando took a moderate tone which sought to balance these competing forces. Rather than publicly emphasizing the illegitimacy of ULWC itself, management argued that it simply could not financially offer the kind of contract improvements sought by ULWC. The union portrayed CRLA's management as similar to professional union-busting firms. Despite management's best efforts, CRLA's perceived anti-

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[73] Saldamando, Alberto, March 10, 1978, "AN OPEN LETTER TO ALL CRLA," CRLA Strike Material, 1978. March 10, 1978) Record Group 3, Box 234, Folder 3, California Rural Legal Assistance, Inc. records, 1966-2000, Stanford University Manuscripts Division.

[74] Saldamando, "AN OPEN LETTER TO ALL CRLA."

[75] John A. Jenkins, "Lawyers on the Picket Line," *Student Lawyer* 7, no. 5 (January 1979): 22.

union stance compared to its pro-labour reputation did not go unnoticed. This was brought up during their first negotiations in 1975-76 when the ULWC "made a presentation at a meeting of the directing attorneys of the twelve offices about the tactics of the management team, pointing out the growing disparity between CRLA's public image and their internal management practices. The directing attorneys passed a resolution requiring the management team to negotiate in good faith."[76] This issue came up again during the 1978 strike. A week in, *The Californian* newspaper wrote that,

> When the pioneering public interest law firm began in 1967, it was the scourge of agribusiness and a thorn in the side of the administration of Gov. Ronald Reagan, who disliked its anti-establishment, pro-union thrust. Now CRLA finds itself in an unaccustomed, uncomfortable position. Its clerical workers are out on strike, and they accuse it of union busting. Moreover, it's staffed by attorneys whose hearts belong to labor even if they're technically members of management themselves.[77]

Saldamando continued to be in “an unaccustomed, uncomfortable position” for the remainder of the strike. Early on, Miller wrote to him, warning that "you are unwilling (and it might be disastrous) to follow the traditional method of breaking an impass (sic) by announcing to the union first and then to all employees that you are going to hire replacements. This might result in the loss of most of your attorneys and might turn the picket lines into battle grounds."[78] However, ten days later on March 30, Miller threatened to resign from negotiations because he believed that CRLA "is not acting strongly enough against the ULWC who through its leadership would want to run CRLA and destroy its effectiveness."[79] Miller instead wanted to impose a pro-

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[76] Union WAGE, "Legal Workers Negotiate Contract."

[77] "Strike shows times have changed for CRLA" *The Californian*, March 14, 1978, 19.

[78] Memorandum, Bill Miller to Alberto Saldamando, March 20, 1978, “Memorandum,” Record Group 3, Box 234, Folder 5, *California Rural Legal Assistance, Inc. records, 1966-2000*, Stanford University Manuscripts Division.

[79] William Miller to Alberto Saldamando (confidential), March 30, 1978, Record Group 3, Box 234, Folder 5, *California Rural Legal Assistance, Inc. records, 1966-2000*, Stanford University Manuscripts Division.

management contract on ULWC and force its return to work.[80] Those on the ground in CRLA's offices, however, continued to advise against outright anti-union activities. The head of the Gilroy office wrote to Saldamando suggesting that "Ordering attorneys and community workers across the picket line (i.e. work in the office or don't get paid) would be fruitless. Hardly anyone would cross. The consequences would be equally ruinous."[81] Saldamando followed a moderate path, one which required CRLA to be willing to wait out the ULWC instead of breaking it.

The CRLA was widely known public-facing organization with a wide constituency and thus winning community support was a priority for both the ULWC and management. CRLA had twelve community offices, all of which had an advisory council which consisted of interested community residents. The strike split the committees; whereas the larger Committee on Advisory Committees adopted a resolution supporting management, the Advisory Committee in the town of Ceres voted with the ULWC. In a subsequent statement, the committee urged Saldamando to "negotiate in good faith" and to "reconsider your position on the grievance panel." It continued that "we feel strongly that the strike and the clerical workers's demands should not be made the scapegoat for CRLA's financial difficulties."[82]

One group which was firmly on the side of the ULWC was Union WAGE and the working women's movement. WAGE used both its newspaper and direct mailings to provide ULWC with much needed logistical support. WAGE's San Francisco chapter, the group's largest

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[80] It is unclear as to why Miller sought to escalate the conflict just ten days after warning Saldamando against hiring temporary replacements (scabs).

[81] Rick Ross to Alberto Saldamando. March 29, 1978, "Re: Operation of Gilroy office during strike," Record Group 2, Box 70, Folder 13, *California Rural Legal Assistance, Inc. records, 1966-2000*, Stanford University Manuscripts Division.

[82] Joe Maxwell to Alberto Saldamando, March 24, 1978. Record 3, Box 234, Folder 5, *California Rural Legal Assistance, Inc. records, 1966-2000*, Stanford University Manuscripts Division.

with over 80 members and supporters, made the ULWC strike a top priority.[83] Beyond visiting picket lines, the chapter also played the roles of fundraiser and publicist. When the strike commenced on March 6, WAGE sent a press release on ULWC's behalf. In weeks 2 and 4 of the 10-week strike, it sent appeals for donations and solidarity actions to its members and newspaper subscribers. The second appeal told readers that "as an organization supporting working women's struggle for equality, Union WAGE has a responsibility to help these women get the contract they are fighting for, and the way we can do that is to raise money for them."[84] Five weeks in, the San Francisco WAGE membership meeting reported that ULWC members felt demoralized after more than a month on strike and WAGE would "re-write a current letter and send it" to a list of supporters on their behalf.[85] In the May-June edition of *Union WAGE*, the ULWC was allotted nearly a full page to tell its story and call for donations and other forms of solidarity.[86] The article emphasized the sexist nature of the dispute, writing that "the tactics which CRLA management has used are typical union-busting tactics, compounded by the attitude that the Union is "just a women's trip"... and that we don't understand "traditional labor-management relations."[87] In the next edition, published after the strike's completion, ULWC offered its "gratitude to the many Union WAGE sisters and brothers who expressed their support with contributions, letters and picketing during the strike."[88] Feminist publications *off our backs* and

[83] ULWC member-organizer Mary Ann Massenburg was also a member of Union WAGE's San Francisco chapter.

[84] "Letter to WAGE members and subscribers," April 5, 1978. Box 15, Folder 11. "San Francisco, Calif. Chapter, 1978," Union WAGE (Women's Alliance To Gain Equality) records, 1971-1982.

[85] "Agenda," April 12, 1978. Box 15, Folder 10. "San Francisco, Calif. Chapter, 1978," Union WAGE (Women's Alliance to Gain Equality) records, 1971-1982.

[86] "Legal Workers on Strike," *Union WAGE*, May-June 1978, 16.

[87] "Legal Workers on Strike," *Union WAGE*, May-June 1978, 16.

[88] "Legal Workers Win Contract" *Union WAGE,* September-October 1978, 7.

the *San Francisco Women's Centers and Women's Switchboard Newsletter* also published appeals for support."[89] Union WAGE's interest in supporting new unions alongside rank-and-file efforts in existing unions made it uniquely able to support the ULWC. More broadly, while "women's issues" like sexual harassment and undervaluing of female-coded clerical jobs motivated CRLA's clerical workers and legal secretaries to fight, alignment with the feminist movement was not necessarily at the heart of their organizing. Mary Ann Massenburg, who was herself a Union WAGE member and committed feminist prior to organizing ULWC, recalled that while "we certainly lived feminist principles and experienced forms of discrimination," the group as a whole did not explicitly identify with the feminist movement. However, the process of unionization and struggling not only with male employers but also with patriarchal husbands, co-workers, and community members, led ULWC's members to "walk the walk" regarding women's rights.[90]

While most unions were absent during the ULWC strike, the United Farm Workers (UFW) offered crucial support, both in public and behind-the-scenes.[91] The UFW was CRLA's largest and most important client; the organization had been founded in large part because of the intense organizing done by the union a decade prior. Farmworker union leaders Cesar Chavez and Larry Itilong were on the initial board of directors for CRLA. However, it was not only the employer which had close relations with the UFW but also the union. ULWC's clerical workers were overwhelmingly Chicana and worked closely in their day jobs with CRLA's indigent,

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[89] "on strike," *off our backs*, June 1978, 4.

[90] Massenburg, interview.

[91] One reason for this may have been the close relationship between WAGE co-founder Anne Draper and the UFW. In the 1960s, Draper, as West Coast Union Labor Director for the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, was one of the mainstream labour movement's most vocal leaders calling for support for the UFW. However, Draper died in 1973, and it is unclear if UFW and WAGE maintained ongoing communication thereafter.

mostly Chicano/a clientele. CRLA's offices were located across the state, primarily in small agricultural towns. This led to a significant amount of overlap between the groups. Though only a few ULWC members were UFW activists, many had been agricultural workers who were recruited directly out of the fields to work for CRLA.[92] Thus, both their employer and the union had close ties with UFW, putting all groups in a difficult situation. ULWC president Bessie Gallardo knew Cesar Chavez well and the union's leadership visited him at the union's headquarters outside of Bakersfield known as La Paz. Massenburg recalls that Chavez expressed his support for the union and committed to pressuring CRLA to make a fair settlement.[93]

On March 19, Chavez announced his support, calling out CRLA's hypocrisy, "CRLA claims to support the rights of workers yet refuses to recognize the rights of its own workers. The legal workers just demands merit your seirious (sic) consideration."[94] He also pledged that UFW members would join the picket lines.[95] Chavez's words had an immediate impact on the willingness of all CRLA staff to cross ULWC's picket lines. Attorney Rick Ross in the Gilroy office wrote that he and others were initially willing to cross the picket lines but "when the UFW sent its telegram of support, however, we all backed off. Nobody speaks now of crossing the picket line."[96] Several well-known UFW members, including Sally Armendariz, Carmen Gomez, and Dolores Sosa, also bolstered the ULWC's Gilroy picket line.[97] Four days after his telegram,

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[92] Massenburg, interview.

[93] Massenburg, interview.

[94] "Cesar Chavez' union backing CRLA strike" *Santa Maria Times*, March 24, 1978, 2.

[95] "UFW will aid striking CRLA workers" *The Modesto Bee*, March 23, 1978, 24.

[96] Rick Ross to Alberto Saldamando. March 29, 1978, "Re: Operation of Gilroy office during strike," Record Group 2, Box 70, Folder 13, *California Rural Legal Assistance, Inc. records, 1966-2000*, Stanford University Manuscripts Division.

[97] Ross to Saldamando. March 29, 1978.

CRLA replied to Chavez, stating that "although it is understandable that the UFW would support a labor union in a labor dispute, the value that CRLA attaches to its working relation with the UFW, and the esteem that is held by all CRLA for the UFW, its membership, its leadership, and its accomplishments, makes it difficult for us to frame an appropriate response."[98] Director Saldamando continued, citing a 1970 agreement "whereby differences between us would be discussed, to avoid any misunderstanding. I would sincerely hope that this agreement would still have some effect and that if you have any questions, you will call or write."[99] He also warned of CRLA's potential dissolution if they acquiesced to the union, asking Chavez to advise ULWC to "be careful not to 'kill the goose.'"[100] Massenburg recalled that Chavez berated executive director Alberto Saldamando for the strike and Saldamando later told her that it was a "turning point in his life."[101]

Negotiations continued throughout the month of April but no resolution was reached, leading to growing frustration on both sides. On April 21, the company alleged that picketers "intercepted a parcel being brough (sic) to CRLA by a Union Bank messenger and tore it and defaced it."[102] On April 28, the ULWC wrote to CRLA's Board of Directors that "the Union has ended up bargaining back down to the old contract on most issues and on many issues has bargained lower than the old contract. We are now faced with simply maintaining some of our

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[98] Alberto Saldamando to Cesar Chavez. March 23, 1978, Record Group 3, Box 234, Folder 5, *California Rural Legal Assistance, Inc. records, 1966-2000*, Stanford University Manuscripts Division.

[99] Saldamando to Chavez. March 23, 1978.

[100] Saldamando to Chavez, March 23, 1978.

[101] Massenburg, interview.

[102] Tom Miller to Mary Ann Massenburg, April 26, 1978, "Memorandum," Record Group 3, Box 234, Folder 1, *California Rural Legal Assistance, Inc. records, 1966-2000*, Stanford University Manuscripts Division.

previous rights and benefits."[103] On May 3, CRLA alleged that several ULWC members allegedly entered a CRLA office and used “profane, obscene and insulting epithets” while threatening violence against non-striking employees.[104] The next day, those clerical workers were suspended by CRLA. On May 4, board member Carl McCarthy, who had previously sought a harsher approach to negotiations, privately criticized Saldamando’s leadership, stating:

> In my opinion, the worst possible thing that could be occurring in the labor dispute at this time, is in fact occurring ---namely, no movement of any substance, certainly no action based on a firm plan or strategy with a clear cut goal is being pursued by management at this time. I think an outside observer might say that the parties have reached an impasse…

In the same letter, McCarthy threatened to fire Saldamando if progress was not made in settling the strike. "I am firmly convinced that if certain actions are not taken in the next week or so your ability, indeed your very authority, to make decisions about the future of the program will be greatly diminished." Because of the pressure to hasten the strike’s end through anti-union actions, CRLA made what it called a “final offer” on May 6, which ULWC rejected. However, the union members were faced with mounting financial problems due to the strike and, though they had rejected an offer two days earlier, the union voted to end its ten-week strike and returned to work. ULWC President Bessie Gallardo told the press that "the union is furious about being forced in without a contract. [We will] carry on the fight from inside." Gallardo told the media that members' financial struggles, including eviction, mounting debt, and hunger, were the

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[103] United Legal Workers of California to California Rural Legal Assistance Board of Directors, April 28, 1978, Record Group 3, Box 234, Folder 8, *California Rural Legal Assistance, Inc. records, 1966-2000*, Stanford University Manuscripts Division.

[104] Tom Miller to Bessie Gallardo and Mary Ann Massenburg, May 5, 1978, "Memorandum," Record Group 3, Box 234, Folder 1, *California Rural Legal Assistance, Inc. records, 1966-2000*, Stanford University Manuscripts Division.

primary reasons for their sudden return to work. However, she left the door open to a potential return to striking if further negotiations faltered.[105]

ULWC members, empowered by months on the picket line, engaged in acts of resistance while back on the job. Mary Anne Massenburg wrote in *Union WAGE* recounting one such act:

> The receptionist in one office who, before the strike, often "volunteered" to make coffee, realized on her return that her supervisor expected her to continue making coffee. When she declined to make coffee, her supervisor said "You mean you're *refusing* to make coffee?" in the tone he reserves for warning notices. She informed him that it was not part of her job duties to make coffee and that further, the coffee pot belonged to her, and she was taking it home.[106]

Three weeks after returning to work, the ULWC and CRLA came to an agreement on the second collective bargaining agreement; key was CRLA's willingness to drop charges against picketers.[107] *Union WAGE* wrote that the wage demands as of April ($100 per month increases across the board) were met after CRLA finally disclosed financial data indicating a projected year-end surplus. Other major issues were satisfactorily resolved: worker security, speed-ups, temporary workers, and seniority. ULWC also won a clause which prohibited mandatory overtime.[108] However, the final contract was a victory for CRLA management in a number of keyways: it established a management rights clause, which the previous agreement lacked. It also gave up the Union CETA hiring veto, the concept of guaranteed staff ratios, and allowed for

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[105] "'Eviction, default and hunger' spur CRLA workers back," *The Californian*, May 9, 1978, 2.

[106] "Legal Workers' Victory" *Union WAGE*, November-December 1978, 6.

[107] Massenburg, interview.

[108] "Legal Workers Win Contract," *Union WAGE*, September-October 1978, 7.

greater management discretion in discharge and discipline, a broader no strike clause, and reduced holiday benefits.[109]

While winning major contract improvements in an era of government austerity and persistent patriarchy was never easy, the United Legal Workers of California were able to do so through dogged solidarity, both internally and with core constituencies in both organized and the women's movement. Doing so exposed the patriarchal attitudes which existed in otherwise progressive organizations, a common experience for feminist union organizers. The support of Union WAGE, particularly its network of women union activists, was key to sustaining the fight for both contracts. The effort had a transformational impact on those involved. In June 1977, the ULWC joined the nascent National Organization of Legal Service Workers (NOLSW), itself a federation of newly-formed independent unions in the legal sector.[110] The union as a whole believed that the undeniable "biggest gain from the fight for our second contract is the change we went through in experiencing our strength together and in seeing our dignity as workers expand."[111] The bold actions of members of the United Legal Workers of California, alongside the vital support of Union WAGE, the United Farm Workers, and the working women's movement, empowered a new generation of clerical and legal workers to organize and improve their lives through collective action.

Supported by organizations like the United Farm Workers, Union WAGE, and the National Lawyers Guild, legal workers at California Rural Legal Assistance (CRLA)

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[109] United Legal Workers of California to California Rural Legal Assistance Board of Directors, April 28, 1978, Record Group 3, Box 234, Folder 8, *California Rural Legal Assistance, Inc. records, 1966-2000*, Stanford University Manuscripts Division.

[110] NOLSW then affiliated with the United Auto Workers (UAW). See "History of NOLSW," National Organization of Legal Service Workers UAW 2320, accessed September 24, 2025, https://www.nolsw.org/.

[111] "Legal Workers' Victory" *Union WAGE*, November-December 1978, 6.

successfully organized themselves despite the lack of a legal basis for doing so and a lack of interest from mainstream unions. Once organized, they negotiated a good contract and then defended it during a period of extreme economic uncertainty. The United Legal Workers of California (ULWC) was at the vanguard which brought the labour movement to legal service workers. Forming the National Organization of Legal Service Workers (NOLSW), otherwise known as UAW 2320 in 1977, NOLSW is composed of 5,600 members in 120 bargaining units across five geographic regions of the United States and it began with independent unions formed concurrently or in the wake of the United Legal Workers of California's victories. Organizing educational, clerical, and non-profit workers has since become a key part of organized labour's strategy to rebuild its members in the wake of plant closures and automation. The challenges faced by ULWC members, including appeals to the philanthropic mission of the organization, have become commonplace. By challenging an otherwise progressive organization to be a fair employer, ULWC inspired others to action. It also strengthened the ability of ULWC's largely Chicana membership to fight for their rights, leading to at least 5 members earning careers in the broader labour movement.[112] ULWC's leading spokesperson, Mary Ann Massenburg, spent a career as a labour representative with the United Auto Workers because of her work with ULWC. She later served as the lead organizer for one of the largest organizing campaigns in modern California history, which led to the successful unionization of the University of California system's teaching and research assistants.[113] By challenging organized labour and developing the confidence among low-paid working-class women, organized labour has been strengthened in the San Francisco Bay Area and beyond.

[112] Massenburg, interview.

[113] Nadine Baron Fishel, "Case Study: University of California," in *Collective Bargaining in Higher Education* (Routledge, 2022).

Chapter 4:

The Service, Office, and Retail Workers' Union of Canada (SORWUC): Bridging the Gap Between Socialist-Feminism and Organized Labour in 1970s British Columbia

> Well, we are full of rage. We see our struggle for fair wage rates as clerical workers, for benefits when we get pregnant, our very livelihoods, getting lost in an uncaring bureaucracy. We see control over our lives being handed to a male power elite. We see losing hard-won gains and starting our struggle over again at the bottom. We see standing up in union meetings to speak and being harassed by wolf-whistles from men union members. This is not just an intellectual or abstract debate to us, but a fundamental and gut issue. - Jackie Ainsworth et al., 1982[1]

Sitting in the Federal Court of Appeal building in downtown Vancouver in June 1976, Pat (Barter) Christie was appalled by the court's ruling. A leading member of the Service, Office, Retail Workers' Union of Canada (SORWUC), she was in court to support union member and working mother Stella Bliss. Bliss had been denied unemployment benefits because she had been pregnant when she was hired. Sitting alongside two attorneys, they watched as a row of "old, white, mostly overweight men" declared what they collectively understood to be an endorsement of discrimination against pregnant workers. Christie later recalled that "even at that young age I knew they were at least morally wrong."[2] SORWUC and the larger women's movement rallied behind Bliss and brought the case to the Supreme Court of Canada. Future Justice Yves Pratte defended the court's majority opinion that "If section 46 treats unemployed pregnant women differently from other unemployed persons, be they male or female, it is, it seems to me, because they are pregnant and not because they are women."[3] While Stella Bliss ultimately lost her court

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[1] Jackie Ainsworth et al. "Getting Organized in the Feminist Unions," in *Still Ain't Satisfied! Canadian Feminism Today*, (The Women's Press, 1982.) 137-138.

[2] Pat Christie email to author, April 7, 2025

[3] Leslie A. Pal, and F. L. Morton. "Bliss v. Attorney General of Canada: From legal defeat to political victory." *Osgoode Hall Law Journal* 24 (1986), 145.

case at the Supreme Court of Canada, the prevailing uproar led to wide-ranging legal changes, including in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedom. SORWUC's social, moral, and legal support meant that the case did not become another example of the needs of vulnerable working women being ignored by patriarchal structures.

This chapter examines the Service, Office, Retail Workers' Union of Canada, which was founded in 1972 by working women experienced in the era's unabashedly radical challenges to the status quo. Like other feminist unions, SORWUC occupied an uncomfortable intersection. It was a legally recognized trade union and functioned as such: much of its time was spent negotiating contracts, organizing new bargaining units, training stewards, and fighting unfair labour practices. However, the first activist experiences for many members were the women's liberation movement and the anti-Vietnam War movement, both of which emphasized consciousness-raising and alternative institution building. A third movement, that of Canadian independent unions, played a major role as well.[4] Both the women's movement and the Canadian independent union movement provided inspiration, volunteers, and vitally important financial support to SORWUC's many organizing drives. SORWUC's radicalism fit in well in 1970s Vancouver, a global city with a long history of a militant working class.

SORWUC boldly led efforts to organize workers who had been ignored by mainstream unions. The union is best remembered for successfully challenging an almost two-decades old court ruling that bank workers had to organize an entire company, not on a workplace-by-workplace basis. A two-year long strike at Muckamuck, a First Nations-themed restaurant in

[4] The relationship between male-led organized labour and feminist unions will be discussed in the next chapter.

downtown Vancouver, has also been relatively well-chronicled.[5] SORWUC's legacy is its willingness to take on nearly impossible organizing challenges and, in the process, demonstrate to the larger labour movement that progress was possible for those working in the burgeoning care sector as well as for others in the pink-collar ghetto.

The first and most complete analysis of SORWUC was published in a pathbreaking 2014 article in *Labour / Le Travail* by historian Julia Smith who highlighted the union's contributions to the under-explored role of women's labour activism as well as the vital role of the state in labour relations during the post-World War II period.[6] Whereas historians prior to Smith investigated SORWUC primarily as a gendered organization, Smith approached it "as a labour union: an organization of workers that used collective bargaining to improve its members' wages and working conditions."[7] But, as I argue, SORWUC was more than simply a collection of collective bargaining units or a women's advocacy group; it is vital to view SORWUC as operating at the cutting edge of both the labour and women's movements, arguing that these were inseparable and decisive factors of its existence. Moreover, this chapter utilizes a variety of primary and secondary sources, including several oral history interviews. This contrasts with Smith, who chose not to do so.[8] Life history interviews were conducted to gain insight into the backgrounds of union organizers. These reveal not only the formal workings of the union as a

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[5] For an overview of SORWUC, see: Julia Smith. "An "Entirely Different" Kind of Union: The Service, Office, and Retail Workers' Union of Canada (SORWUC), 1972–1986." *Labour* 73 (2014): 23-65. For the bank worker organizing drive, see: The Bank Book Collective, *An Account to Settle: The Story of the United Bank Workers (SORWUC)*. Press Gang Publishers, 1979. For the high-profile Muckamuck dispute, see Janet Mary Nicol. "" Unions Aren't Native": The Muckamuck Restaurant Labour Dispute, Vancouver, BC (1978-1983)." *Labour/Le Travail* 40 (1997): 235-251; Helen Potrebenko, *Two Years On The Muckamuck Line*. (Service, Office, and Retail Workers' Union of Canada, 1981).

[6] Julia Smith, "An Entirely Different Kind of Union: The Service, Office, and Retail Workers' Union of Canada (SORWUC), 1972-1986" *Labour/Le Travail*, 73 (Spring 2014), 24.

[7] Smith, 28.

[8] Smith, 29.

body but also the complexity of union culture and how it changed over time. Moreover, this is the first study of SORWUC that looks beyond Vancouver, highlighting organizing efforts in often neglected non-urban settings. It does so by discussing previously unexamined facets of SORWUC's activism and ideology. One section investigates the evolving relationship between SORWUC and AUCE. Another looks at the union's involvement in the Stella Bliss case, which ultimately paved the way for a vigorous feminist conception of gender rights in Canada. Lastly, it looks at its involvement with organizing home support workers, then known as 'homemakers', in the mill town of Powell River. Taken together, these sections represent less investigated parts of SORWUC's legacy, one which demonstrates the transformative power of new workplace organizing.

Writing in 1971, academic and activist Jo Freeman described two branches of the feminist movement. The oldest identified closely with the National Organization of Women (NOW) which was focused on building institutions and had ties to establishment liberal politics and the existing labour movement. The younger, more radical branch prided "itself on its lack of organization."[9] As Julia Smith has shown, contemporary male unionists, newspaper editors, government officials, judges, and politicians viewed SORWUC with suspicion, seeing it as a mere extension of the women's movement. The existing historiographies of the labour and feminist movements from this period are also largely binary. This chapter challenges the bifurcation of these movements, seeing SORWUC as a socialist feminist trade union run by women which also formalized itself through the established legal processes necessary to negotiate collective agreements and defend the rights of members. Throughout most of its history, it was tightly integrated into both movements while also fulfilling its legal obligations as

[9] Jo Freeman. "The origins of the women's liberation movement." *American Journal of Sociology* 78, no. 4 (1973): 792-811.

a recognized trade union. This chapter contends that socialist-feminism provided an ideological framework which bridged the labour and women's movements. By integrating a class and gender-based analysis, SORWUC's leaders showed that these movements were not only compatible but mutually reinforcing.

In workplace after workplace, SORWUC fought for some of the most vulnerable wage workers in British Columbia. Its most high-profile campaigns involved B.C.'s bank workers (1976-78) and Vancouver-based food service workers (1977-83). This chapter builds off of these efforts to investigate other facets of SORWUC's existence. SORWUC's relationship with its sister union, the Association of University and College Employees (AUCE), tested the bonds of feminist labour unity and revealed the impact of austerity on working class feminism. SORWUC's support for social service agency workers in Powell River, British Columbia resulted in groundbreaking contracts which opened the door to widespread unionization. As described above, the Stella Bliss case became a cause celebre for the women's movement across Canada, resulting in major changes to the notion of gender equality before the law in Canada.

This chapter suggests that SORWUC played an intersectional role in both the women's movement and labour movement throughout its existence. Based in Vancouver, but active across British Columbia and occasionally elsewhere in Canada, SORWUC is defined by its unique structure and a willingness to fight struggles which were either hidden from or ignored by other movements. As Jean Rands, a seminal figure in the feminist union movement wrote in 1972:

> Our goal must be to convince more and more working women of the possibility and necessity of struggle, and of basic women's liberation ideas, and to convince women's liberationists of the necessity of union organizing - not as an end in itself, but as an essential defense against the arbitrary power of the employer, and as the beginning of collective action in the area where we as women have our real collective strength - at work.[10]

[10] Rands, Jean, "Toward An Organization of Working Women," *Women Unite,* Canadian Women's Educational Press, 1972. 148.

By combining these worlds, SORWUC developed a new approach during its brief existence which sought to unite militant, democratic trade unions with the cooperative principles of the women's movement to produce major material and social gains for working-class women.

SORWUC originated in the New Left, specifically student activism at Simon Fraser University (SFU) in Burnaby. The Vancouver Women's Caucus (VWC), the first women's liberation group in Canada developed at SFU before moving 'off the mountain' and into the broader community.[11] This was part of the worldwide revolt of university students which peaked in 1968 with mass protests and building occupations. As SORWUC co-founder Jackie Ainsworth recalled, the era's youth culture of "resistance and fightback" inspired them to act boldly.[12] Many SORWUC members interviewed related how the anti-Vietnam War movement and youth culture brought them into the movement. Jean Rands ran for mayor of Vancouver as a 21-year old Trotskyist intent on using the position to end the Vietnam War.[13] For her part, Ainsworth was a working class anti-war activist who, after being harassed while working as a restaurant server, sought out the labour movement.[14] Both Ainsworth and Pat Christie joined the socialist-feminist movement after meeting Jean Rands.[15]

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[11] Milligan, Ian. "COMING OFF THE MOUNTAIN: Forging an Outward-Looking New Left at Simon Fraser University" BC Studies 171, (Autumn 2011): 69-91.

[12] Jackie Ainsworth interview with the British Columbia Labour Heritage Centre, August 23, 2017

[13] In 1966, Jean Rands ran for mayor of Vancouver as a 21-year-old. Described in *The Province* as a Marxist, she received 6,534 votes out of 87,450 cast. (7.4%) A newspaper described her vote total as "more support than expected" and "a major factor in the outcome." "Campbell gets nod with surprise vote," *The Province*, December 15, 1966, 1.

[14] Jackie Ainsworth interview with the British Columbia Labour Heritage Centre, August 23, 2017.

[15] Pat Christie, interviewed by Thomas MacMillan, July 12, 2024.

The Abortion Caravan is the best-known project of the Vancouver Women's Caucus.[16] Over Thanksgiving weekend in October 1969, approximately 200 women's liberation activists from western Canada and the United States converged on the University of British Columbia for the Western Regional Conference for Women's Liberation organized by the Vancouver Women's Caucus. Entitled "Women: Reform or Revolution?", it attracted activists from across the region.[17] The VWC's ties to activists in the United States and its general regional approach reflects the socialist-feminist movement's strength on the West Coast, particularly in the Pacific Northwest. Participants later recalled that discussions between Canadian and American conference attendees revealed a wide gulf in terms of class analysis. VWC member Marcy Toms recalled that the Americans were "very un-critical of some of the basic problems for all women...By that I mean...we were farther ahead...in terms of having a class analysis and realizing that a few more or an equal number of women at high echelons...in a variety of places wasn't going to make a ... difference to all women."[18] Reflective of the increased class analysis by Vancouverites, the theme of the first day of the conference was organizing women in the workplace and on university campuses.

Participants found that the conference's biggest takeaway was the need for a nationwide direct action to guarantee abortion rights. According to Karin Wells, abortion access was chosen as the VWC's signature issue because the group believed that it deeply resonated with all women

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[16] Karin Wells, *The Abortion Caravan: When Women Shut Down Government In The Battle For The Right To Choose* (Toronto, Second Story Press, 2020).

[17] Specifically, participants from outside of British Columbia traveled from the Canadian provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan, and the U.S. states of California, Idaho, and Washington. Liz Briemberg, "Beginnings Women's Caucus," *Vancouver Women's Caucus: A Women's Liberation History Project*, www.vancouverwomenscaucus.ca

[18] Marcy Toms, interviewed by Frances Wasserlein, October 11, 1986, quoted in "An Arrow Aimed At The Heart" The Vancouver Women's Caucus and the Abortion Campaign 1969-1971" 68.

regardless of class, race, and religion.[19] While the VWC was unquestionably committed to winning access to abortion on demand, the caravan "was also [interested in] introducing the women's movement. We were interested in women's liberation, in equality, and in changing society. Period."[20] In the months following the regional conference, organizers planned what became known as the Abortion Caravan. The caravan, which brought abortion rights to the forefront of political discourse across Canada, was as unabashedly radical in opposition to the capitalist system, enough so that it drew the attention of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP). With the phrase "Smash Capitalism" taped onto the side of its van alongside pro-abortion slogans, the Abortion Caravan effort linked capitalism to the denial of women's reproductive rights.[21] While few of SORWUC's founders traveled on the caravan itself, many played either a support role back in Vancouver during the trip or joined the VWC following the caravan's success.

SORWUC and AUCE

Though the VWC is most well-known for its efforts to promote abortion rights, working women's issues were as important for many group members. In 1970, the VWC office was located in the Vancouver Labour Temple, alongside those of most provincial trade unions.[22] In January 1970, the Working Women's Workshop formed as a component of the VWC and, in

[19] Wells, *The Abortion Caravan*, 26.

[20] Wells, *The Abortion Caravan*, 28.

[21] Sethna, Christabelle, and Steve Hewitt. "Clandestine operations: the Vancouver women's caucus, the abortion caravan, and the RCMP." *Canadian Historical Review* 90, no. 3 (2009): 463-496.

[22] Potrebenko, "My Life in SORWUC," 36

October of the next year, the Working Women's Association (WWA) was founded as an independent organization.[23] Jean Rands and Jackie Ainsworth recalled that,

> From the beginning, many members of Vancouver Women's Caucus thought the organization of working women should be a major long-term task of the women's liberation movement. Those of us who saw ourselves as Marxists were convinced that the organization of working women was a critical part of building a revolutionary working class movement.[24]

For WWA members, it was obvious that forming a new union was necessary if they were going to move beyond a largely educational role. Helen Potrebenko recalled that "we had to form our own union if there was going to be any new organizing. The existing unions were not fighting for women's issues."[25] Thus, in 1972, the WWA helped form two unions. The first was the Association of University and College Employees (AUCE), a union open only to university workers in British Columbia. Formed after failed organizing drives by two mainstream unions, Helen Potrebenko recalled that,

> The organizers at UBC, now disillusioned with both [CUPE and OTEU] noted that there was a tradition of independent unions in B.C. In March, Madeleine Parent of the Canadian Textile and Chemical Workers Union came to speak at UBC. Her exposé of international unions was the last straw - UBC organizers decided they needed their own union. They concluded they needed an independent feminist union and approached the Working Women's Association to help them write a constitution.[26]

The WWA, including most of the future founders of SORWUC, spent the summer of 1972 writing AUCE's constitution.[27] Jackie Ainsworth recalls that "those of us who were

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[23] "Vancouver Women's Caucus: The summer of 1968 to the end of 1971," https://www.vancouverwomenscaucus.ca/herstory/chronology/

[24] Jean Rands and Jackie Ainsworth, "Toward Women's Unions" Vancouver Women's Caucus, https://www.vancouverwomenscaucus.ca/women-workers/toward-womens-unions/

[25] Potrebenko, "My Life in SORWUC," 18.

[26] Potrebenko, "My Life in SORWUC," 19.

[27] Potrebenko, "My Life in SORWUC," 19.

downtown formed SORWUC and those of us at UBC formed AUCE and so, Jean and I went and got jobs at UBC."[28] Early leaders of AUCE and SORWUC envisioned a sisterhood in which the two unions were to jointly organize the 90% of women workers who lacked a union, especially those low-paid, dead-end jobs in the pink collar ghetto. Shortly thereafter, the WWA itself transformed into SORWUC, a union aimed at mostly private sector women workers who worked "off the mountain" in downtown Vancouver. Over time, distance grew between them. While AUCE established itself as a durable organization at several higher educational institutions, SORWUC struggled to gain a permanent foothold and a substantial membership. A major reason for the distance was that SORWUC sought to maintain a movement mindset which emphasized organizing and growth while AUCE sought stability in the face of austere public budgets and growing hostility to the rights of labour unions. The evolving relationship between these two unions demonstrates how structural issues such as austerity as well as the decline of second wave feminism structured AUCE's politics of solidarity and survival.

After both were formed, members of each union were made aware of the happenings of the other, mainly through enthusiastic updates in each others' newsletters. For example, AUCE Local 1's newsletter urged readers in early 1974, "if you know anyone working outside UBC who is thinking of joining a union, have them contact SORWUC and talk to some of the women there."[29] Over time, a formal relationship was established; in June 1976, AUCE's provincial convention passed a resolution which required the executive to "establish a joint committee with SORWUC to organize unorganized workers and that this committee report to future conventions." In 1977, the resolution was updated to state that a "provincial full-time person and

[28] Jackie Ainsworth, interviewed by Thomas MacMillan, July 8, 2024

[29] "SORWUC - A NEW UNION FOR DOWNTOWN OFFICE WORKERS," *Across Campus*, February 18, 1974, 3.

at least one representative from all" locals of AUCE be on said joint committee and that it should "organize a joint stewards seminar and other joint educational activities."[30]

A key part of union sisterhood was financial assistance. SORWUC had ambitious organizing goals but struggled financially from its earliest days. Crucial to their efforts was financial support from AUCE, the CCU unions, and individual CLC-affiliated union locals. During SORWUC's campaign to organize bank workers, AUCE lent or donated over $15,000, which was more than any other union.[31] While support for SORWUC among AUCE's executives and most active members was strong during the bank worker organizing drive, efforts to subsidize SORWUC in an ongoing way with AUCE dues were sometimes rejected by membership. For example, in February 1977, SORWUC organizers asked AUCE Local 1 for a subsidy of $200 a month for six months. In April, members voted to recommend that the Provincial Association make the financial commitment in order to support SORWUC hiring a full-time staffer.[32] While both the Provincial Association's Executive Committee and the Provincial Convention endorsed a $200 monthly subsidy to SORWUC until the 1978 convention, membership rejected it via referendum.[33] In January 1978, AUCE executive member Jay Hirabayashi argued in favour of a plan that would see the local donate SORWUC 25 cents per month per member until AUCE's Provincial Association conducted a referendum on the matter or until the AUCE provincial convention authorized such a payment.[34] SORWUC was in

[30]"AUCE Provincial constitution, policies and procedures," n.d. Box 7, File 6, Association of University and College Employees fonds, University of British Columbia Library Rare Books and Special Collections.

[31] The Bank Book Collective, *An Account to Settle* 27.

[32] "Minutes: General Membership Meeting 10 March, 1977" *Across Campus*, April 7, 1977, 14.

[33]"AUCE Provincial constitution, policies and procedures," n.d. Box 7, File 6, Association of University and College Employees fonds, University of British Columbia Library Rare Books and Special Collections.

[34] "Notice of Motions," *Across Campus*, January 20, 1978, 2.

dire need of additional funding as it sought to organize bank workers across Canada.[35] Ultimately, Local 1 passed a resolution which recognized the controversial nature of the donation, stating

> Whereas this motion involves a substantial outlay of funds, and, whereas this is a contentious issue which involves strong feelings on both sides, and, whereas it has always been a principal that important issues be decided by the maximum number of people and through a thorough discussion of the issues; I therefore recommend and move that the issue of donating money to SORWUC be taken to referendum vote and, further. that ten minutes be set aside on the agenda for a discussion of this issue, and further that statements by contributors on both sides of the issue shall accompany the ballot.[36]

However, SORWUC did not leave the meeting without any financial support: $1,000 was donated “on a oneshot basis until a referendum can be conducted.”[37]

Local 1 collected statements for and against the referendum. Jay Hirabayashi, who was the paid staff member of the local, sought to counter what he argued were misconceptions about his motion. Some argued that the recurring donation should be made by provincial AUCE, not a local. While agreeing with the sentiment, he argued that AUCE had already made significant financial commitments to SORWUC in the recent past due to their shared origins and mission. Their sister union was in a dire financial position regarding organizing bank workers and needed their assistance to continue. He also argued that AUCE must remain committed to uplifting women workers, on both the principle of solidarity and self-interest, stating "as long as there are other women doing essentially similar work to us that are paid less, we will continue to have difficulty improving our own wages and conditions." Hirabayashi also pushed back against claims that SORWUC was “an irresponsible bunch of radicals that don’t have the know-how and

[35] CLC-affiliated locals, which had provided a significant amount of support, were successfully pressured by their international unions and the CLC into ending their donations to SORWUC.

[36] "Minutes of Meetings," February 17, 1978. *Across Campus*, 3.

[37] "Minutes of Meetings," February 17, 1978. *Across Campus*, 3.

finances to organize bank workers which should be done by the CLC anyway." He said that "as far as their being radicals, if they are, then so were we when we chose to unionize ourselves. Some of the people protesting this motion simply are not comfortable being associated with any union including AUCE."[38]

Members opposing the monthly donation shared a more limited vision for their union. Donna Robertson warned that "the more we are obligated to support other Unions, the more we bind ourselves. Whatever happened to free enterprise. We are stifling our economy by keeping up with the Joneses. Let us not become radicals." Eleanor Dondaneau wrote "Local 1 didn't have such a "facility" to fall back on when organizing…Instead of crawling on the handout bandwagon give SORWUC the golden opportunity of independence. If there is any money to be given away, return to Local 1 in the form of reduced Union Dues!" Shirley Dick questioned the trustworthiness of SORWUC itself, stating "Would we just be supporting the organization of the Bank Workers? - I think not. What accounting do we have of how they spend their funds? What assurance do we have that we would not be supporting "Tempest in the Teapot" situations in which we would have no voice?"[39]

In May, membership soundly rejected the proposal in a referendum, with only 25% of Local 1 casting votes in favour. Though it voted against subsidizing SORWUC with a per-capita monthly donation from the local, AUCE Provincial's May 1978 convention voted to loan $10,000 dollars interest free to their sister union.[40] In response, Shirley Dick wrote once again to

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[38]Jay Hirayabashi, "Re: SORWUC Referendum" n.d. Box 7, File 6, Association of University and College Employees fonds, University of British Columbia Library Rare Books and Special Collections.

[39]" Submissions on the SORWUC Motion," n.d., AUCE Local 1 fonds, Box 15, Folder 16, Association of University and College Employees fonds, University of British Columbia Library Rare Books and Special Collections.

[40] "Association of University and College Employees Annual AUCE Convention," May 27, & 28, 1978, AUCE Local 1 fonds, Box 15, Folder 10, Association of University and College Employees fonds, University of British Columbia Library Rare Books and Special Collections.

Across Campus stating "I strongly object to 'bailing out' other unions when our own union almost ceased to exist. Our membership in a referendum, flatly turned down any further financial support of the SORWUC union. Our voice meant nothing apparently, although I would presume our representative expressed our views to the Provincial."[41]

The following month, in June 1978, indigenous workers at Vancouver's Muckamuck Restaurant were on strike and formally organized as part of SORWUC. They appealed to Local 1 for financial support and membership narrowly approved a $500 contribution to their strike fund. Thus, while AUCE's sister union enjoyed the support of many of AUCE's members, including a majority of its executives, a substantial number of rank-and-file members did not share the executive's enthusiasm and opposed ongoing subsidies to SORWUC. While AUCE had made a substantial financial commitment to SORWUC, it was minimal in comparison to what the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) could have donated if it had supported the effort. However, in 1978, the CLC intervened to stop its members from donating to the organizing drive. Instead, it created its own parallel organizing effort known as the Canadian Union of Bank Employees which created confusion and dissension across the labour movement. Faced with mounting legal bills and opposition from the CLC, SORWUC made the controversial decision to suspend its campaign to organize bank workers in July 1978. Writing in *Across Campus*, SORWUC told AUCE members how appreciative it was of their financial support while lamenting that it had to drop the campaign because they were "not strong enough to take on the banks and the CLC at the same time."[42]

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[41] "Letters," *Across Campus*, August 1978.
[42] "Service, Office, Retail Workers Union of Canada," *Across Campus*, September 1978, 13.

The June 1979 AUCE Provincial Convention voted down a resolution sponsored by delegates from Local 4 at Capilano College which would have recalled the $10,000 loan given to SORWUC the year prior but did pass a resolution preventing future financial support for SORWUC "without appropriate written documentation"[43] The convention did vote to donate $500 to support striking Muckamuck workers, though this was significantly less support than it had given to the bank workers organizing drive. Overall, AUCE's membership grew increasingly skeptical of SORWUC over the course of the late 1970s. Despite the efforts of many AUCE regulars who fought to maintain a close relationship, the feelings of sisterhood declined as SORWUC's financial debts grew and AUCE sought stability.

Sisterhood clearly meant sharing resources and involving each union in the struggles of the other, including their sharing of office space and equipment. Because of systemic financial problems, SORWUC was not always able to meet its financial obligations as AUCE's co-tenant. For example, between October 1977 and August 1978, SORWUC did not pay their portion of the rent and owed AUCE $312.50.[44] By 1979, AUCE's approach to SORWUC changed dramatically, which resulted in AUCE becoming protective of its office equipment and prioritizing its work over that of SORWUC's. This came to a head in a series of joint meetings held in September and October 1979. In preparation for the meeting, AUCE's provincial executives drew up the agenda without consulting SORWUC, which also had no vote on any resolutions passed at the joint meeting. Whereas SORWUC thought the meeting was being held to discuss how to strengthen their sisterhood and how to better organize the unorganized, the

[43] *Across Campus*, June 1979.

[44] "AUCE Provincial Meeting - Minutes," "Association of University and College Employees Annual AUCE Convention," September 9, 1978, AUCE Local 1 fonds, Box 11, Folder 9, *Association of University and College Employees fonds*, University of British Columbia Library Rare Books and Special Collections.

meeting agenda was instead focused on SORWUC's extensive financial debts to AUCE and explaining how AUCE had voted to block its sister union from using AUCE's new office space and equipment. It also voted to prioritize AUCE's use of their building's primary meeting space above SORWUC's. Moving forward, SORWUC needed the permission of 3 provincial executives to use what had previously been a shared space. A long discussion was held which highlighted how "extending the use of AUCE's equipment to SORWUC made for constant interruptions for the AUCE Office worker."[45] This obviously difficult conversation reflected the decline of shared values between the two feminist independent unions.

SORWUC's representatives "felt that they were called to task, which was surprising to them because 'we felt we were your Sisters.'" Melody Rudd, a SORWUC member who had recently been a member of AUCE Local 2 and president and secretary-treasurer of AUCE Provincial, was among the loudest voices in expressing her disappointment. SORWUC's leadership regarded discussion of control over office equipment as "petty" and "expressed shock at the idea 'you can use this, you can't use this, you might be able to use this but we have priority'." AUCE's office staffer, Sheila Perrett "responded by saying that it was not our [AUCE's] feeling that use of the office/library/equipment was in any way petty, that the purchase of the equipment came after a lot of serious consideration."[46] One SORWUC leader expressed discomfort with being in the shared space, stating that "we aren't welcome down here, it feels uncomfortable to even get the milk from the 'frig.'" When AUCE's executives expressed that their membership had voted to restrict SORWUC's office access, Jackie Ainsworth said that

[45] "Report To The AUCE Provincial Executive RE SORWUC Meeting," AUCE Local 1 fonds, Box 11, Folder 10, Association of University and College Employees fonds, University of British Columbia Library Rare Books and Special Collections. https://rbscarchives.library.ubc.ca/provincial-executive-minutes-4.

[46]"REPORT TO THE AUCE PROVINCIAL EXECUTIVE RE SORWUC MEETING."

AUCE's executive should circumvent attacks from membership. While each side emphasized how increased information sharing and more meetings between the unions would strengthen their sisterhood, by late 1979, the relationship between AUCE and SORWUC was in shambles.

This strained relationship was indicative of the different mindsets and concerns of each union. AUCE, having established itself with multiple contracts, was concerned with their union's financial wellbeing. Both the BC Social Credit Party and the federal Conservative government were proposing austere budgets that threatened public sector workers. As such, AUCE was in a difficult position because it had long term ties to SORWUC, including having subsidized it since its inception. However, AUCE described their own membership as "somewhat insular" and said that "they have no way of hearing about SORWUC and how it's doing [which is why] they can't very well support SORWUC struggles." The anti-SORWUC sentiments were part of what provincial vice-president Bob McAdie had called "lowered union consciousness [which] prevails everywhere," including in AUCE.[47] It was members, not the executives, who pushed for the changes. AUCE's struggles, and therefore protecting its institutional property, were the union's top priority. Executives emphasized that though they were still ideologically aligned with SORWUC, it had a duty to its membership to limit SORWUC's access and to generally create boundaries which had not previously existed.

SORWUC, on the other hand, sought to maintain a movement mindset in which institution building was secondary to the larger goal of organizing the unorganized. SORWUC argued that the future of all office workers was tied up in their abilities to organize on a grand scale; in the meeting, SORWUC's Susan Margaret pointed to their recent effort to distribute

[47]"Provincial Minutes," October 21, 1978, AUCE Local 1 fonds, Box 11, Folder 10, Association of University and College Employees fonds, University of British Columbia Library Rare Books and Special Collections. https://rbscarchives.library.ubc.ca/provincial-executive-minutes-4.

10,000 leaflets which connected the recent strike at Simon Fraser University by AUCE Local #2 with the well-being of all Vancouver office workers. Despite these arguments, it is clear AUCE's priorities had shifted and the days in which the two unions envisioned radically changing the world together were in the past.

While AUCE and SORWUC saw each other as sisters, there were some class differences which separated the groups. While clerical workers were always part of SORWUC, the union took up the fight of food service workers on several occasions. Food service work did not require a significant amount of formal education, unlike a university-based clerical worker. Ulryke Weissgerber, a SORWUC leader who spent a significant amount of time supporting the First Nations workers at Muckamuck restaurant, believed that working at a university "was a different beast." She recalled that the world of academia was a "slightly more refined place to be than being a sous chef in a restaurant."[48] Despite this, interviews reveal largely positive memories of their relationship. Ainsworth recalled that "we always regarded ourselves as sister unions. To my knowledge, forever. We were often invited to speak at AUCE gatherings, yeah, both union to union as I said and members to members, individuals to individuals. [Former AUCE members are] some of the most important people in my life, even today."[49]

Stella Bliss and the Fight for Maternity Leave

One of SORWUC's contributions to both the feminist and labour movements was the crucial support it provided Stella Bliss, a worker and mother denied federal unemployment insurance benefits because she had been pregnant. Backed first by SORWUC and later other

[48] Ulryke Weissgerber, interviewed by Thomas MacMillan, July 10, 2024

[49] Ainsworth, interview

groups, *Bliss v. Attorney General of Canada* became a major civil rights case which went to the Supreme Court of Canada. Though Bliss lost, it revealed structural gender inequality which, with the weight of the women's movement behind it, challenged the notion of women's equality before the law in Canada.[50] Because of SORWUC's status as both a recognized trade union, its deep ties to the feminist movement, and its commitment to defending working women, SORWUC assistance was crucial at bridging the gap before the women's movement and organized labour. The Bliss case culminated in significant legal and political efforts which reshaped gender law in Canada, including the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

When Stella Bliss first encountered SORWUC organizers in downtown Vancouver, she was already pregnant.[51] Members were distributing leaflets to working women and the recent emigrant from England quickly joined as an at-large, non-bargaining unit, member. Stella Bliss had begun working as a leasing secretary at a Vancouver Ford dealership in October 1975 and shortly thereafter realized that she was pregnant. Like many working women at the time, she initially hid her pregnancy from her employer. When it was discovered three months later, she was fired. She then unsuccessfully applied for Unemployment Insurance (UI). After her dismissal, SORWUC and Bliss opened a case at the British Columbia Human Rights Commission, which agreed that she had been discriminated against because of her pregnancy and ordered her former employer to rehire her.[52] She returned to work for two months before being

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[50] For other studies of the Bliss case, see: Karin Wells, *Women Who Woke Up The Law: Inside the Cases That Changed Women's Rights In Canada*, Second Story Press, 2025,103-128.

[51] Though other scholars have claimed that Bliss joined SORWUC only after her initial appeal was denied, longtime SORWUC member Pat Christie recalls Bliss joining during her pregnancy, though the specific month is unclear. Pat Christie email to author, April 11, 2025.

[52] The BC Human Rights Commission was a relatively new body at the time, having only formed in 1973 under the Dave Barrett-led NDP government. It was the first human rights commission in Canada. Criticized as being too liberal, it was later dismantled by the Social Credit Party-government in 1983.See: R. Brian Howe and David Johnson, *Restraining Equality: Human Rights Commissions in Canada* (University of Toronto Press, 2000) 13.

fired once again in mid-March, just four days before she gave birth. Because she had been fired, she again applied for regular Unemployment Insurance benefits but she was denied because she had not been working at the time of conception as the law required at the time. She did not seek maternity benefits at the time as she planned to be ready and able to begin working a week after giving birth. Her initial appeal to the Board of Referees, the first round of the UI appeals process, was also denied. To progress her case to the next level, provincial law required that Bliss have the support of a recognized trade union, labour association, or the support of the Chair of the Board of Referees. Since the Chair had denied her appeal while stating that "there was no principle of importance involved in the case," SORWUC's support was key to the appeal process.[53]

In July 1976, SORWUC's membership formally voted to support her appeal to the Unemployment Insurance Commission.[54] SORWUC's role in this case included legal and moral support as well as crucial fundraising and logistics. Bliss had recently arrived in British Columbia and benefited from SORWUC's deep ties to the feminist and labour communities which proved crucial as it progressed from a standard appeal to a Supreme Court case. Pat Christie recalls that Bliss "did not have much of a personal support network in Vancouver."[55] In November 1976, SORWUC and Vancouver Community Legal Assistance Society attorney Alan McLeod submitted the case. The union argued in *The Province* that UI benefits discriminate "by creating a special section of the Act which ignores the biological role of childbearing which is as much a part of any woman's life as is working itself."[56] SORWUC announced that it would

[53] Pal, Leslie A., and F. L. Morton. "Bliss v. Attorney General of Canada: From legal defeat to political victory." Osgoode Hall Law Journal 24 (1986), 144.

[54] Helen Potrebenko "My Life in SORWUC: Memories of a Feminist Union," 64.

[55] Pat Christie, email to author, April 11, 2025.

[56] January 5, 1977 "UIC Faces Maternity Challenge," *The Province*, 23.

challenge the case further and lobby Parliament to address the inequity if needed.[57] The union also reached out to Joan Wallace and the Vancouver Status of Women for assistance.[58] Surprisingly, the second-level of the appeal process, the Umpire, sided with Bliss, arguing that the denial of benefits "was predicated on sexual differences." However, as SORWUC memoirist Helen Potrebenko later recalled, the "UIC appealed this decision, because, they said, it would cost them money. Discrimination against women is cheap; no other reason is needed."[59] The belief that UI was discriminating against working women led feminist lawyer Lynn Smith to join the case.

The Bliss case coincided with an attempt by UIC, beginning in January 1977, to claw back maternity benefits received by AUCE members at UBC and SFU.[60] SORWUC members had also won maternity benefits for members at the Simon Fraser Student Society, the Electrical Trades Credit Union, and Volunteer Grandparents, though none had utilized them.[61] The Stella Bliss case soon became a *cause célèbre* for feminists across Canada. In May, Bliss was joined in her hearing by members of the Vancouver Status of Women and SORWUC.[62] The following month, the court reversed the decision, writing that "If [the law] treats unemployed pregnant women differently from other unemployed persons, be they male or female, it is, it seems to me,

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[57] "UIC Faces Maternity Challenge,"

[58] "The Unemployment Insurance Commission Versus Stella Bliss of B.C.," June 21, 1977 "Maternity Leave: Stella Bliss Case,", Box 99, File 52, *Vancouver Status of Women fonds*, Archives and Special Collections of the University of Ottawa.

[59] Potrebenko, "My Life in SORWUC," 64.

[60] The efforts by AUCE to resist these attacks on maternity leave by the federal government are outlined in chapter 1.

[61] Potrebenko, "My Life in SORWUC," 110.

[62] Pal and Morton. 145-146.

because they are pregnant and not because they are women."[63] SORWUC's Pat Christie recalled "I have never forgotten that row of old, white, mostly overweight men saying that she had no case because she was being treated the same as all other women! Even at that young age I knew they were at least morally wrong."[64] SORWUC's support, both tactical and political, was crucial in moving the case forward.

The case was then appealed to the Supreme Court of Canada and the women's and labour movements stepped up to defend her. The Vancouver Status of Women formed an appeal fund, seeking to raise $2,500. In addition to SORWUC, the B.C. Government Employees' Union, various Vancouver feminist groups, and the National Action Committee on the Status of Women all donated funds for the case.[65] In early 1978, both SORWUC and the B.C. Federation of Labour successfully raised money from union locals on Bliss's behalf. The Bliss case united feminism and segments of organized labour to fight what both movements saw as an obvious case of gendered workplace discrimination.

Despite the efforts of feminists, organized labour, and civil libertarians, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled against Bliss on October 31, 1978. Local 1 responded to the decision stating that this decision displayed "supreme ignorance regarding the true nature of inequality. Nature may have created DIFFERENCES between men and women, but it is legislation which creates the basis for inequality when it uses these differences as the basis for differential treatment."[66] While Bliss struggled to raise her child as a single mother and stepped away from the case, she became "a national symbol for the women's movement, and to a lesser extent, the

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[63] Pal and Morton, 145.

[64] Pat Christie, email to author, April 7, 2025

[65] Pal and Morton, 146.

[66] "Maternity" SORWUC Newsletter, Fall 1978, 22.

trade union movement."[67] SORWUC had done its best to accommodate working mothers like Bliss, including setting up a playpen in the union office.[68] Despite the loss, the movement built to support Stella Bliss's case may have also contributed toward a positive end to the attempted clawback of benefits case against AUCE and SORWUC's collective bargaining agreements. In March 1979, a male judge sided with SORWUC and AUCE when he found that the maternity "top off" the unions had won in collective bargaining did not violate UIC rules after all.[69] The Bliss decision spurred other workers and unions to push forward. In May 1980, the Canadian Textile and Chemical Union unsuccessfully defended union member Anna Santos after she was denied maternity benefits because she had been unknowingly pregnant when she began work.[70] At the time of the Santos case, Gordon Fairweather, chairman of the Canadian Human Rights Commission, told the *Toronto Star* that "we've been warning ministers and deputies since 1978 that we think the act is discriminatory. We're glad to see someone testing it."[71] In 1981, the federal Task Force on Unemployment Insurance supported revisions to maternity benefits which drew directly from the Bliss case and which would have been awarded to her had they been in place at the time.[72] Reformers also pointed to *Bliss v. Canada* as a clear example of the

[67] Pal and Morton, 148

[68] Pat Christie, email to author, April 11, 2025.

[69] "UIC, Maternity Incentive Allowed," *Times Colonist*, March 17, 1979, 9.

[70] The Canadian Textile and Chemical Union (CTCU) was founded in 1954 by socialist labour organizers Madeleine Parent and Kent Rowley. In 1969, CTCU became a founding affiliate of the Confederation of Canadian Unions (CCU). The union was involved in a number of prominent strikes of low-income working women in Ontario. Joan Sangster. "Remembering Texpack: Nationalism, Internationalism, and Militancy in Canadian Unions in the 1970s." *Studies in Political Economy* 78, no. 1 (2006): 41-66.

[71] "A week costs pregnant mom her benefits" *Toronto Star*, May 21, 1980, A3.

[72] Pal and Morton, 152

ineffectiveness of the Canadian Bill of Rights.[73] Legal scholars argue that "what the Canadian people got was section 15 of the Charter - the most sweeping constitutional guarantee of equality to be found in any liberal democracy in the world. The key clause of section, "the equal benefit of the law," comes directly from *Bliss*."[74] SORWUC's presence in both the feminist and labour movements played a crucial role in bringing them together to challenge structural gender inequality for working women nationwide.

Powell River Homemakers and the Beginning of a Home Support Staff Union

While SORWUC is best remembered for its daring bids to organize Canadian bank and food service workers, there has been little research into the other group of low-paid, precarious, women workers on which had an even greater long-term impact: care workers. Dozens of British Columbian caregivers, including those working with children and adults, joined SORWUC and remained until its final days. Daycare workers in metro Vancouver affiliated with Local 1 also negotiated contracts which improved working conditions. What eventually became SORWUC Local 5, composed of home support workers based in Powell River, British Columbia, won the first contract for home support workers in Canadian history in 1978. Powell River, located approximately 175 kilometres northwest of Vancouver on the Sunshine Coast, had a population of approximately 17,000 residents in 1970. The economy was dominated by the pulp and paper mills, which helped develop a strong union culture among workers of all genders.[75] Powell

[73] W. S. Tarnopolsky, "The Equality Rights in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms," *Canadian Bar Review* 61, no. 1 (March 1983): 250.

[74] Pal and Morton. 153.

[75] Powell River workers of all genders and skillsets had a history of militant union action. For example, in 1969, schoolteachers had a one-day strike. In June 1970, 2,000 union members shut down the town's paper mill for weeks when they refused to cross another union's picket line. In 1971, the Hospital Employees Union went on a prolonged strike, the first in its history. See "Teachers strike in protest over education financing," *The Province*, May 30, 1969; "Town shows its bitterness," *The Province*, June 10, 1970; "Alderman intervenes in strike," *The Vancouver Sun*, October 9, 1971.

River's support workers stood by SORWUC until its final days. One reason for their commitment to the union was that SORWUC was among the only unions which sought to organize these often-invisible women workers. Lisa Pasolli and Julia Smith argue that scholars have reproduced the hidden work of these caregivers, as few studies of Canadian care workers have been published to date.[76] As noted above, this neglect is partially due to the private location of their labour as well as the notion that care work "is deeply attached to women's "labors of love."[77] While Pasolli, Smith, and a handful of scholars have examined child care workers, there has not yet been a comprehensive study of home support workers (previously known as homemakers) in Canada. For these reasons, SORWUC's unique relationship to both organized labour and the women's movement led it to organize workers classified as "domestics" and thus ineligible for basic legal workplace protections. Though they gained basic protections through SORWUC's efforts, British Columbia's home support workers only unionized following the union's decline. An unlikely union, United Food & Commercial Workers (UFCW), financially supported the leaders of the Powell River Homemakers. This partnership led to thousands of home support workers becoming unionized over the next decades.

During the first effort to unionize bank workers, SORWUC organizers utilized personal contacts to find bank employees across the province interested in unionizing. One of the unforeseen benefits of this word-of-mouth campaign was that the union found non-bank workers who also wanted to unionize. As Pat Christie, the Homemakers primary point of contact for SORWUC's national office, recalled,

> We reached out to everyone we knew around the province telling them about the bank drive. A friend of mine had moved to Powell River and she circulated a notice about a

[76] Pasolli, Lisa, and Julia Smith. "The Labor Relations of Love: Workers, Childcare, and the State in 1970s Vancouver, British Columbia." *Labor* 14, no. 4 (2017): 39-60.

[77] Pasolli and Smith, "The Labor Relations of Love," 40.

> union rep (me) coming to town to talk about unionizing the banks and one bank worker and several homemakers turned up.[78]

Though people employed as homemakers often skewed older, the 40 or so women employed in Powell River were overwhelmingly younger women who were forced, either through divorce or death, to find work outside the home.[79] Their initial grievances focused on fighting precarity and raising their extremely low wages. A 1968 study found that the lowest paid homemakers in British Columbia earned $1.17 per hour while the highest made $1.25, which was also the provincial minimum wage. Their wages were 12% lower than women factory workers, who earned $1.41 in 1965.[80] Homemakers also received "a very uneven pattern in relation to fringe benefits (health and other insurance, sick leave, holiday, superannuation)."[81] Though not required to increase wages to match provincial wage increases, homemakers' wages continued to resemble the minimum wage continued in the 1970s. Overtime pay was also usually compensated at regular pay, not time-and-a-half as it was for regular workers who work was covered by labour law.

Unions in both Canada and the United States began to recognize the importance of organizing home support workers in the 1970s; like other attempts to organize women-dominant workplaces, this effort was due in part to the decline of traditionally unionized factory and extractive labour jobs and, partially due to the fact that government subsidies were designated to

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[78] Pat Christie, email to author, April 8, 2025.

[79] Pat Christie, email to author, April 8, 2025.

[80] "Average earnings of male and female employees in manufacturing, survey week 1956 to 1965, and percentage increases over previous year," *Statistics Canada*, date modified: August 17, 2009. https://www65.statcan.gc.ca/acyb02/1967/acyb02_19670756015-eng.htm.

[81] Visiting Homemaker Services in Canada, Canadian Council on Homemaker Services, 1982, 28

support a rapidly aging population, stimulating demand for care workers.[82] For SORWUC, helping to organize care workers was part of the union's core values and it supported their organizing efforts.[83]

Home support workers are hired by private, non-profit organizations with public funding. Thus, they are publicly funded but work in the private sector. Unlike daycare workers, those caring for people at home, called home support workers, were initially classified as domestic workers and thus not covered by the labour code. Without a union, basic protections guaranteed to most other workers, such as minimum wage laws, were not mandated. Thus, the union sought to lobby elected officials for two reasons: first, the agency which employed them was entirely funded by government subsidies, which meant that their clients had to pay out of pocket if their collective agreements increased their wages or benefits. Secondly, because existing labour law classified them as "domestics," they had no right to basic protections available to workers outside of the home setting.[84] This status raised the stakes of winning a union contract which would, at a bare minimum, guarantee those rights.

In 1977, a group of agency home support workers employed by the Powell River and District Homemakers Service joined SORWUC Local 1, which also included dozens of daycare workers located in Vancouver among other certified bargaining units in the Lower Mainland. By unionizing, the Powell River Homemakers became the second group of unionized home support workers in the province. Twenty-two members joined in 1977 but this grew to forty-five in 1979,

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[82] Boris, Eileen, and Jennifer Klein. "Labor on the home front: unionizing home-based care workers." *New Labor Forum* 17, no. 2, 32-41. 2008.

[83] For example, in March 1976, SORWUC organized a one-day strike of 150 workers across 8 daycare centres in Vancouver to protest ongoing Social Credit Party-led cuts to daycare funding. See Pasolli and Smith, 39.

[84] "Local 1 Report (In Other Units)" SORWUC Newsletter, Fall 1978, 6.

which made it the union's largest bargaining unit.[85] A year later, membership totaled around sixty. When they signed their first collective agreement in May 1978, the Powell River Homemakers became the first agency homemakers in British Columbia history to have a union contract. Workers won the right to paid overtime, travel allowances, sick leave, worker's compensation and maternity leave. The contract was negotiated by bargaining unit members with the assistance of Pat Barter, an experienced at-large member who was assigned to support them. In 1982, the Homemakers bargaining unit split off and became SORWUC Local 5. Their 1983-84 contract was negotiated by members after the Local declined the national union's assistance. They won a $.35 per hour across-the-board raise, which meant a 4% raise for experienced members and 5% for those more recently hired. This meant that Powell River Homemakers were likely the only agency workers in the province to get a pay increase that year.[86] However, they noted regretfully that their negotiations team had made several significant mistakes, including a lack of strike mobilization, and that their wages were still significantly lower than Homemakers doing the same work in the Vancouver area.

The national union assisted the Homemakers in several ways, including by organizing workshops which trained members on how to organize, bargain, and be a shop steward. It also provided financial assistance that allowed union members to travel to Vancouver; while there, Powell River Homemakers stayed with other SORWUC members in their homes. This was a common practice more broadly in SORWUC.[87] The group's first contract was negotiated with the direct assistance of other union members. However, starting in the early 1980s, Local 5, like

[85] Helen Potrebenko, "My Life in SORWUC: Memories of a Feminist Union", n.d., Box 17 File 16, Service, Office and Retail Workers Union of Canada (SORWUC) fonds, University of British Columbia Library Rare Books and Special Collections. (unpublished manuscript), typescript. 111.

[86] "Local 5 Report" in S.O.R.W.U.C. News, Fall 1983, 8

[87] Pat Christie email to Thomas MacMillan, April 8, 2025

other SORWUC locals, functioned more-or-less autonomously.[88] While membership and activity decreased over the decade throughout the union, Powell River was the only local which thrived despite being geographically separated from the union's headquarters in Vancouver. The Powell River Homemakers, SORWCU Local 5, thus created a self-governing culture that led them to successfully grow despite the lack of support from the larger union.

The Powell River Homemakers were inexperienced in labour relations and SORWUC lacked cohesion, leading at times to pessimism and a lack of membership engagement. One major difficulty in engaging membership in union activities was that many were working mothers, so adding union governance to their regular responsibilities of domestic and paid work was difficult. Reflecting on their most recent contract negotiations, the Local reported that "there was too much talk of how we can't afford a strike (who can?); how no one wants to strike (who does?); and how no one will do anything - like press releases, going to meetings, doing leaflets etc, (were they ever asked early enough so that the efforts would have paid off?"[89] Moreover, frequent workplace injuries hampered members of the Local as well. Powell River delegates told the 1981 SORWUC convention that "the women in the bargaining unit have other problems as well. About 2 women every month are out with back problems since they have to lift people who are unable to lift themselves."[90]

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[88] In Memorium of Peggy Schima, trailblazer & union organizer," UFCW 1518, https://ufcw1518.com/update/uncategorized/trailblazer-union-organizer-peggy-schima-dies-at-89/

[89] Service, Office, Retail Workers Union of Canada, "Powell River Homemakers……Negotiations Analysis," January 1982, Box 3, S.O.R.W.U.C. News. SORWUC Local 7, Archives and Special Collections of the University of Ottawa.

[90] Service, Office, Retail Workers Union of Canada, "Minutes of the National Convention of the Service, Office, & Retail Workers Union of Canada," May 9-10, 1981, Box 2. SORWUC Local 7 fonds, Archives and Special Collections of the University of Ottawa.

What had been Local 5 was able to survive and then thrive after SORWUC's dissolution because they had learned grassroots organizing techniques from the national union and they eventually found an unlikely mainstream union which was willing to fund them as they put those organizing skills to work among other home support workers across British Columbia. What started as a single local of 40 homemakers in Powell River has gone on to include over 2,200 home support workers as of 2022. When SORWUC fell apart before dissolving in 1987, each bargaining unit had to make a choice: would it become a stand-alone independent union, de-certify, or affiliate with a new parent union? The Powell River Homemakers "were really frantic to find union protection again; we were not going to be without it."[91] However, as they were one of the only union locals representing home support workers in the province, there was no obvious union with which they could affiliate. Several unions rejected them, including the Hospital Employees Union (HEU), Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), and the British Columbia Government Employees Union (BCGEU). HEU's rejection was particularly disappointing; "it was like someone slapped us in the face: we were told point-blank: "you do not fit in with our union. You are 'domestics'!" Wow!"[92] Rejection by CUPE was also shocking, Schima recalled their representative stating "Sorry, we have no room for you, we do not relate in any way, shape, or form with home support workers."[93] Dismissed by the unions which represented healthcare workers, a chance conversation between co-shop steward Sue Scott and a unionized grocery store employee led them to contact her union, the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW). Though it did not represent home support workers at the time

[91] "Why are Home Support Workers Members of UFCW 1518?" UFCW 1518, YouTube, accessed April 15, 2025.

[92] UFCW 1518, "Why are Home Support Workers Members of UFCW 1518?"

[93] "Why are Home Support Workers Members of UFCW 1518?"

and did not have a highly democratic union culture as they had experienced in SORWUC, Schima recalled thinking that "we don't fit in there either but everybody else is turning us down."[94] During a "very nice sunny late afternoon" in Powell River, a meeting occurred between representatives of UFCW and the Powell River Homemakers, Schima recalled that "Sue and I must have asked at least 600 questions. We got the impression that at least those people are listening to us and maybe something will come up." Schima, Scott, and their fellow workers had three requirements for their future union affiliation:

> We want to keep our union funds, I think that was about 3000 dollars. We want to keep our union form, important to us. We wanted a commitment from the union that they would help us financially, with expert advice to organize as many home support workers in BC as we possibly could.[95]

These requirements reflect SORWUC's influence on the bargaining unit, as financial autonomy, internal democracy and organizing the unorganized were core values. Without hesitation, UFCW agreed, "The answer was right there and then, the people didn't even have to phone headquarters, [they replied] we will meet your demands, we will stand behind you, we will help you organize."[96] At a subsequent meeting, UFCW "came back with a suggestion that instead of UFCW taking over the remnants of SORWUC, the 42 of us in Powell River, it was a merger. Did we feel good about that! We were treated as equals!"[97] UFCW agreed to pay the two former shop stewards "to book off and get out there and start organizing the unorganized home support workers in BC. Wow, it went fast!"[98] This kind of barnstorming organizing was outside

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[94] "Why are Home Support Workers Members of UFCW 1518?"

[95] "Why are Home Support Workers Members of UFCW 1518?"

[96] "Why are Home Support Workers Members of UFCW 1518?"

[97] "Why are Home Support Workers Members of UFCW 1518?."

[98] "Why are Home Support Workers Members of UFCW 1518?."

of the skillset which SORWUC had trained them to do, Schima recalled that "neither Sue nor I ever had any experience in organizing. We were cold on that subject. Did not know what to do." Nonetheless, the newly minted organizers had been schooled on democratic union principles by SORWUC and financially backed by UFCW. Schima recalled that "the big adventure of organizing took off! Sue and I went all over BC, from the coast to the interior and met a lot of wonderful people. We struggled at times, going back to certain home support workers over and over, to explain the benefits of being in a union."[99] Shortly before her death, Schima was nominated by UFCW Local 1518 for the British Columbia Federation of Labour's Joy Langan Social Justice Award.[100] Brought into the labour movement and inaugurated by SORWUC, the Powell River Homemakers went on to organize thousands of other home support workers across the province. As of 2018, more than 2,200 home support workers were members of UFCW 1518. Former SORWUC president Pat Christie, who was tasked with supporting the Homemakers during and continued to do so after SORWUC's existence, recalls that their later successful organizing drive, in part, because "they learned about organizing from us."[101]

In 1972, SORWUC co-founder Jean Rands wrote that "our goal must be to convince more and more working women of the possibility and necessity of struggle, and of basic women's liberation ideas, and to convince women's liberationists of the necessity of union organizing…" She saw workplace organizing "not as an end in itself, but as an essential defense against the arbitrary power of the employer, and as the beginning of collective action in the area

[99] "Why are Home Support Workers Members of UFCW 1518?."

[100] In Memorium of Peggy Schima, trailblazer & union organizer,"

[101] Christie, interview.

where we as women have our real collective strength - at work."[102] Founded with this ethos, SORWUC's goal was thus advancing the liberation of working women from both patriarchy and capitalism. Filled with youthful confidence, the union was able to fill vital gaps in both movements which led to materially-improved working conditions for many workers across sections, like the home support workers, which were either invisible or inaccessible to mainstream, male-dominated unions. As a recognized trade union with deep ties to the women's movement, the union was able to structurally assist Stella Bliss in her case against Canada's discriminatory laws against pregnant workers. Through their struggles and dedication, union activists jumped over legal hurdles and challenged taboos which made the labour movement more open to the needs of working women. In the early 1980s, the union lost the energy which had characterized it as the founding cohort burnt out and/or otherwise moved on to other life projects. However, despite having just a few dozen core members at any given time, SORWUC's legacy of ambitious organizing among working women largely ignored by mainstream organized labour offers clues to organizers of new unions in the present day: if you are bold, refuse to wait for others to act, and fight for and with the most marginalized, the ensuing struggle can renew the best traditions of the global labour movement.

[102] Jean Rands, "Toward An Organization of Working Women," *Women Unite,* (Canadian Women's Educational Press, 1972) 148.

Chapter 5

"A grievous self-inflicted wound"

The mainstream Canadian labour movement and its responses to feminist union organizing

"Thousand-mile journeys begin with single steps, mighty oaks start off as little acorns, and a tiny West coast 'union for working women' just might be the herald of major changes in both those figures." - *Montreal Star*, January 1978[1]

"The inability of the Canadian Labour Congress to accommodate S.O.R.W.U.C. -- a union of women, by women, for women -- and its failure to keep the fledgling United Bank Workers Union alive, may prove a grievous self-inflicted wound to the prospect for collective employee action in the fastest-growing sector of the Canadian workforce."
-Paul C. Weiler, former BC Labour Relations Board chair, 1980[2]

Donning winter hats and jackets, forty-five socialist-feminist picketers endured heavy rain to register their outrage. On November 26, 1977, while many of those in attendance were on strike, instead of their employer, they picketed the offices of an international union. Rather than holding placards demanding a fair contract, the young women carried signs that read: "SOLIDARITY is more than just a word," "We'll Destroy You Says Local 40 to S.O.R.W.U.C." and "Local 40 Organizes Scabs." They were protesting against the solidarity-destroying decision of the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees and Bartenders International Union (HERE), Local 40 to undermine their ongoing strike by signing replacement workers (scabs) into their membership.[3] This chapter contends that many male-led unions were disinclined to organize and empower women workers until they proved willing and able to self-organize. New unions, built on socialist-feminist principles, were highly democratic and open to all workers and thus presented a challenge to the male-led labour movements' approach. The clearest example of the

[1] "B.C. 'Union for working women' gets off the ground." *The Montreal Star*, January 16, 1978.

[2] Paul Weiler, *Reconcilable Differences: New Directions in Canadian Labour Law* (The Carswell Company Limited, 1980), 24.

[3]" Union Now Fights Union in Bimini Pub Strike," *The Vancouver Sun*, November 26, 1977.

socialist-feminist challenge to the labour establishment was SORWUC's successful effort at kickstarting organizing among Canadian bank workers. While alternative and progressive segments of the labour movement responded favourably to SORWUC's early success and innovative approach, the CLC's undermined the new union and the legitimacy of its expansive approach to labour politics. In blocking SORWUC's organizing drive, the CLC proved that it was willing to put its own sectarian interests ahead of the needs of white-collar women workers. Despite advances for women in some unions in the 1970s, the CLC's actions toward SORWUC demonstrated the continued power of patriarchal values and business unionism in the labour movement. The CLC's failed attempt at replicating SORWUC's efforts, with its characteristic top-down organizing approach, combined with unfavourable labour law, and an ownership class determined to ensure unions would not gain a foothold in banking, has left a legacy of failure for organized labour in the banking industry to the present day.

The history of the Canadian Labour Congress is still mostly unwritten, as there is no definitive history of the national federation and only a handful of journal articles about various aspects of the organization's nearly seventy-year history. However, because of the publicity around SORWUC, the landmark decision to allow branch-by-branch organizing in banking, the conflict between SORWUC and the CLC, and the CLC's high-profile organizing drive, there were several scholarly articles written about this in the early 1980s. Both Elizabeth J . Shilton and Allen Ponak and Larry F. Moore lay a foundation for understanding the recent (at the time) changes to Canadian labour from a social sciences perspective.[4] Rosemary Warskett writing in the wake of the failure of both SORWUC's and the CLC's organizing campaigns, highlights how

[4] Shilton-Lennon, Elizabeth J. "Organizing the Unorganized: Unionization in the Chartered Banks of Canada" Osgoode Hall Law Journal 18, no. 2, August 1980); Ponak, Allen, and Larry F. Moore. "Canadian Bank Unionism: Perspectives and Issues." *Relations industrielles* 36, no. 1 (1981): 3-34.

labour law was insufficient for producing unions in banks.[5] Patricia Baker, responding directly to Warskett, argues that labour relations boards favoured CLC unions and disadvantaged SORWUC.[6] More recently, Julia Smith argues that struggles with labour relations boards were determinative for the effort.[7] While this chapter acknowledges the importance of labour boards and their role in frustrating SORWUC, it contends that more attention needs to be placed on the role of the national Canadian Labour Congress and certain affiliates, which is the focus of this chapter. It also seeks to differentiate between affiliated unions in B.C., which often supported SORWUC's landmark organizing, and the national CLC which was determined to extinguish their organizing. Though the focus of this chapter is on the CLC-SORWUC conflict, it goes further by seeking to explain the role of male-led unions more broadly. Because this dissertation is the first to look at feminist unions as a semi-coherent trajectory within the North American labour movement, this is the first study to examine the trends across said unions.

The conflict between the CLC and SORWUC brought to light competing worldviews typical of the women's liberation and labour movements. Feminist unions were structured to be maximally decentralized and democratic in order to prevent an entrenched bureaucracy from holding power. Modeling their constitutions after that of the breakaway Pulp, Paper and Woodworkers of Canada (PPWC), B.C.'s feminist unions sought to govern themselves as the antithesis of the 'regular unions' affiliated with the CLC. Helen Potrebenko wrote that:

> SORWUC was particularly keen to avoid the problems of regular unions because we came from the women's movement, not trade unions. This instantly solved the problem of male dominated leadership. We were women, dedicated to fighting for women's rights

[5] Rosemary Warskett, "Bank worker unionization and the law." *Studies in Political Economy* 25, no. 1 (1988): 41-73.

[6] Patricia, Baker. "Some Unions Are More Equal Than Others: A Response to Rosemary Warskett's "Bank Worker Unionization and the Law"." *Studies in Political Economy* 34, no. 1 (1991): 219-233.

[7] Julia Smith, "An Entirely Different Kind of Union: The Service, Office, and Retail Workers' Union of Canada (SORWUC), 1972-1986" Labour/Le Travail 73 (Spring 2014).

> and interested in organizing the kinds of places where we ourselves worked. By virtue of this choice of where to organize, we thought the membership would remain largely women and the problem of male chauvinism would never arise. We thought most of the other problems could be avoided by making provision for proper democracy in the union.[8]

In contrast, historian Craig Heron described mainstream unions in post-war Canada as "great blocks of independent, jealously guarded power" which "each had its own, often extensive educational programs, research facilities, and communication media." Union officials "kept tight control on their unions," including the use of veto power and trusteeships while guarding "their organizations' financial stability, public image, and internal cohesion cautiously and suspiciously."[9] SORWUC's grassroots organizing and values starkly contrasted with the highly bureaucratized nature of organized labour in Canada in the post-war period.

The Canadian breakaway movement, which significantly influenced B.C.'s feminist unions, emphasized the necessity of safeguarding against a centralized authority asserting control over local unions. As Mason Godden has noted regarding the founding of one breakaway, "Retaliation and discipline … culminated in the Steel local at Alcan being placed under trusteeships by the USWA [United Steelworkers of America] headquarters in Pittsburgh. This hardened the militant resolve of the smelter workers, who organized themselves into CASAW Local 1 in March 1972."[10] Inter-union rivalry is a defining feature in the history of organized labour.[11] The history of the CLC is no exception, having been founded in 1956 through the

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[8] Potrebenko, 20.

[9] Craig Heron, *The Canadian Labour Movement: A Short History Third Edition* (James Lorimer & Company Publishers, 2012) 88.

[10] Godden, 154.

[11] Competition between unions and union federations for members and influence dates back to at least the formation of the American Federation of Labor in 1886. Since then, rivalries between international federations, including the AFL and the Knights of Labor, the Industrial Workers of the World, the Workers' Unity League, and the CIO, were all commonplace prior to the 1950s. Independent unions and company union-controlled unions have also played a role in this competition. In Canada, rival trade unionism is even more common, with rival federations

merger of competing national federations, with one of its explicit purposes being to reduce competition between trade unions.[12] However, as we will see, competition between CLC affiliates continued, especially in the largely union-less world of clerical workers. While fierce competition was the norm for established unions, the less-experienced organizers of feminist unions were less aware of this facet of the labour movement. The competitive, hierarchical nature of the mainstream labour movement contrasted with the cooperative desires of SORWUC and the women's movement from which it originated. The feminist union optimistically believed that the CLC would support their efforts, despite their lack of affiliation, because it was "important to the labour movement as a whole."[13] SORWUC believed that by refusing to raid CLC-affiliated locals and by "doing what [the CLC claims to] want to do...organizing the unorganized," they would win the backing of, or at least not be opposed by, that body.[14] As organizer Heather MacNeil told *the Vancouver Sun*, SORWUC believed that the CLC should

> be strewing confetti at our feet. If we manage to organize the bank workers, it will be a tremendous boon to all trade unionists. We don't need this junk we're getting from them now. We need the trade union movement to say to us: 'You've done an incredible thing. We're right behind you. Here's your wings.[15]

This level of credulity was due a lack of experience with mainstream unions. Participant interviews revealed that feminist unions were generally founded by people with little to no experience in the existing labour movement. While a number of activists grew up in union

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continuing to the present day. For more, see: Walter Galenson, *Rival Unionism in the United States*, (New York, Russell & Russell, 1966).

[12] Eugene Forsey. "The Movement towards Labour Unity in Canada: History and Implications," *The Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science / Revue canadienne d'Economique et de Science politique* 24, no. 1 (February, 1958), 70-83.

[13] The Bank Book Collective, *An Account to Settle*, 121-123.

[14] "Taking on the banks and the CLC" *The Vancouver Sun*, December 2, 1977.

[15] "Taking on the banks and the CLC" *The Vancouver Sun*, December 2, 1977.

households, they were primarily experienced in university and/or social movement politics, not labour unions. Jackie Ainsworth, for example, looked to the phone book to find a union to represent her and her co-workers in their first attempt at organizing.[16] While activists learned about the competitive and cut-throat nature of internal labour politics over time, most were still shocked and dismayed when the CLC not only declined to support them but undermined their efforts under the guise of "trying to prevent [the] balkanization of bank employees."[17]

Prior to the 1980s, most women in the labour movement believed that the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) had little interest in their plight nor did they even feel welcomed at major union events. Judy Darcy, who became CUPE's second woman president in 1991, recalled male unionists acting extremely hostile to the presence of women in general and nowhere more so than in male-dominated spaces such as conventions: "I remember my first CLC convention in 1974 when any female felt she was taking her life in her hands if she walked through certain sections of the convention…Any women who spoke felt she had to bend over backwards by saying, 'I'm not one of those women libbers, but…'"[18] Displays of emotion or the presence of an infant in a union space were judged a lack of "tough leadership qualities" and evidence of misplaced priorities by women union activists.[19] Thus, the presence of vocal women like Judy Darcy at union conventions and other union spaces as well as the display of the full range of emotions threatened the masculine ideals which bound union bureaucrats and activists together.[20]

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[16] Jackie Ainsworth, interviewed by Thomas MacMillan, July 8, 2024.

[17] "Taking on the banks and the CLC" *The Vancouver Sun*, December 2, 1977.

[18] Judy Darcy, Foreword, *Women Challenging Unions: Feminism, Democracy, and Militancy*. Editors Linda Briskin and Patricia McDermott (University of Toronto Press, 1993) vii-viii.

[19] Darcy, vii-viii.

[20] As Peter Gossage and Robert Rutherdale have argued, studying physical spaces designed and occupied by men can teach us "much about the particular sets of gendered ideals that informed their conception and use." Peter Gossage and Robert Rutherdale (eds). *Making Men, Making History: Canadian Masculinities across Time and Place*. (UBC Press, 2018). 16.

A January 1973 article in *The Vancouver Sun* titled “Unions side with bosses, not with female members” interviewed a number of women who voiced their frustrations with male-led organized labour. Among those was SORWUC founding member Jean Errington, who said that "talking to union people about women is like talking to management."[21] BC NDP MLA Phyllis Young noted that "when unions negotiate a pay increase of 35 cents an hour for men and 20 cents an hour for women, that's discrimination. I am a trade unionist--a dedicated trade unionist--and that's why I am so turned off."[22] Frustration with men’s disinterest in women’s issues in the labour movement was felt by those who worked directly for mainstream labour unions as well as by activists. Gail Borst, who was director of women's programs for the British Columbia Federation of Labour (BCFL), told *The Province* in 1977 that her male colleagues "used to laugh and leave when the women's committee came up[;] now they only turn and leave." The annual report of the BCFL’s Women’s Committee regularly put forth major demands like pay equity which recognized women workers and their unique needs at each convention; while these policies were well-received in theory, the committee found that many unionists were disinterested in implementing them in their individual locals and unions. The report stated that when "words are simply mouthed and formulated at convention and not translated into reality, [they] do not fulfill the promise unionism holds out to women. Progress seems to be discouragingly slow."[23] Women unionists in the 1970s expressed extreme frustration with the attitudes of men unionists towards their unique needs, leading some to seek out a different kind of union experience.

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[21] Pat Moan. "Unions side with bosses, not with female members." *The Vancouver Sun*, January 6, 1973.

[22] Moan. "Unions side with bosses, not with female members."

[23] Jan O’Brien. "They labor for recognition" *The Province*, February 9, 1977.

Though top officials within the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) were well-aware of the necessity of organizing white-collar workers from its earliest days and 'major campaigns' were announced every few years by high-level bureaucrats, little progress was made outside of the public sector among clerical workers. This occurred for several reasons; First, the CLC's approach was slow, cautious, and top-down, focusing on convincing uninterested existing unions to organize clerical workers. Second, new organizing often stimulated inter-union rivalry, an issue which the CLC was created to eliminate. Lastly, the CLC's almost entirely white male leadership viewed women and racial minorities as unlikely to successfully unionize, which led them to devote their resources toward organizing blue-collar white male workers. The boldness of feminist unions challenged the CLC's hesitancy regarding white-collar workers.

The Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) was formed as a merger of two existing national federations on April 23, 1956. Eleven days prior, a labour reporter for *The Hamilton Spectator* reported that "an organizing drive amongst white collar workers will be one of the first objectives" of the newly-unified national federation.[24] In June of that year, Eugene Forsey, the CLC's research director, claimed that "the CLC is concentrating on organizing [white collar workers] into union membership."[25] However, a year later, a major article about labour's intention to "spend big money on campaign for membership" included virtually no mention of white collar workers.[26] Former CIO unions had organized a small number of office staff who worked in the offices of their blue-collar members, causing jurisdictional infighting in the CLC

[24] "On The Labour Beat," *The Hamilton Spectator*, April 12, 1956.

[25] "Profits to Stir New Pay Demands," *The Vancouver Sun*, June 11, 1956.

[26] "Labor Will Spend Big Money On Campaign for Membership," *The Financial Post*, April 20, 1957.

and AFL-CIO.[27] In June 1959 at its biannual convention in Montreal, the Office Employees International Union, later an opponent of B.C.'s feminist unions, threatened to withdraw from the AFL-CIO and CLC if it was not recognized as having "the sole right to organize office workers regardless of whether they worked in industrial plants or in business offices."[28] Despite this threat, the union did not withdraw and the CLC announced a 21-man committee "to organize white collar men" less than a month later.[29] In 1961, the CLC again announced its intention to organize white collar workers, with *The Toronto Star* predicting that the effort would be "similar to the militant groups of the late 1930's and early 1940's that gave birth to today's powerful industrial unions." Once more, the drive was focused on bringing together "top-level union leaders."[30] Two years later, the CLC's approach was described by the *National Post* as "still slow and cautious."[31] In May 1967, the CLC held a two-day conference which called on affiliates to "stimulate organizing activity across Canada." CLC president Claude Jodoin cited inter-union rivalry as a major roadblock to new organizing,

> If we can get unions and their staffs busily engaged in organizing the unorganized, perhaps they will be less inclined to raid each other or waste time and effort on futile jurisdictional disputes. If the rivalry between unions could be submerged for just one year in co-operative organizing programs all over Canada, the climate could be so much improved that a great many unions would begin serious negotiations of mergers.[32]

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[27] According to OPEIU general counsel Joseph E. Finley, "When the OEIU came into a factory situation to start a campaign with the clericals, the plant union, dormant in its past attitudes toward the clericals, would often bestir itself and intervene in the campaign…This would require the Office Employes to do battle with their larger and far wealthier sister union without the outside help [of their national federation] that had been so well utilized in many past situations." Joseph E. Finley, *White Collar Union,* (Octagon Books, 1975), 158.

[28] "Union may quit CLC in dispute," *The Montreal Star*, June 16, 1959.

[29] "CLC To Organize White Collar Men," *The Toronto Star*, July 3, 1959.

[30] "Unions Chase Office Help," *The Toronto Star*, January 12, 1961.

[31] "Union Plans Big Gains In Major Sign-Up Drive" *National Post*, March 30, 1963.

[32] "CLC drive to enlist non-union workmen." *The Windsor Star*, May 12, 1967.

In 1971, there were another round of calls from within the CLC for a renewed effort to organize white collar workers. In June, Ray Haynes, secretary-treasurer of the BC Federation of Labour, called for inter-union cooperation, an idea he described as “fairly radical.” He told a CUPE convention that "we must develop an organizing effort which is adequately financed, with sufficient experienced organizers to do the job."[33] In August, CLC executive vice-president Joe Morris (a future opponent of feminist unionism) announced that another nationwide attempt at organizing office workers would soon begin. Reflective of the glacial pace of organizing from mainstream unions, *The Province* reported that "A [CLC] staff member has been working on organizational detail for the past four years."[34] At the 1972 CLC convention, the organizing committee won a two-cent-per-month per capita dues increase which was earmarked for another effort to organize private-sector white collar workers. In January 1973, the CLC launched the Association of Commercial and Technical Employees (ACTE) as a directly-chartered local. By launching an entirely new union, the CLC sought to overcome the endless jurisdictional questions which had plagued organizing for decades. While technically a national effort, ACTE’s set its initial organizing sights on insurance workers in the Greater Toronto Area. With a substantial budget of $360,000 per year, the campaign included on-the-ground staff and volunteer organizers as well as modern advertising methods aimed at young workers, including billboards, newspapers and periodicals.[35] Though it did not lack dedicated funding, the effort did not achieve much success and in 1974, *The Last Post*, an alternative political magazine, wrote that "without any substantial breakthroughs, the campaign is proving to be a protracted and

[33] "Unions should organize 'white collars'-Haynes," *The Province*, June 7, 1971.

[34] "Office Workers CLC starts drive" *The Province*, August 2, 1971.

[35] “CLC out to organize white collar workers,” *The Ottawa Journal*, January 26, 1973.

difficult one."[36] SORWUC's Heather MacNeil experienced the ACTE drive firsthand as a Toronto-based volunteer, an experience which she later negatively contrasted with SORWUC. She noted that ACTE had not been able to connect with workers because it came from the outside - many office workers felt that supporting the union "would just be like having a second boss."[37] Charlotte Johnson, another former ACTE workplace organizer who later became president of SORWUC's United Bank Worker local, summed up the difference this way:

> Working with people in SORWUC was a whole different experience. I didn't have to try and convince them that a union was needed in the banks. They were working there, and were experiencing the same difficulties, unfairness, poor working conditions and wages that I was. And it didn't matter which chartered bank, our stories were similar. Working with SORWUC and the other unions that were giving them their support, I understood what trade unionism and solidarity meant.[38]

One union which was quite successful at organizing women workers was the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE). Founded in 1963 through the merger of two smaller unions, the national union increased its membership by over 100,000 over the following decade and was the primary beneficiary of new laws which granted provincial and federal civil servants the right to unionize. In doing so, CUPE organized "workers, professionals and para-professionals who [had] been considered beyond the pale."[39] Canada's fast-expanding public sector including a significant number of women workers and CUPE quickly became the most prominent CLC-affiliated union which promoted women's rights. Grace Hartman, a Toronto-area civil servant, rose through CUPE's ranks to become secretary-treasurer in 1967 and, in 1975, the first woman

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[36] Rae Murphy and Robert Chodos "Labour's orderly - well almost orderly- transition" in *Let Us Prey*, (James Lorimer & Company, 1974) 172.

[37] "B.C. 'Union for working women' gets off the ground." *The Montreal Star*, January 16, 1978.

[38] Bank Worker Collective, *Account to Settle*, 32.

[39] Rae Murphy and Robert Chodos "Labour's orderly - well almost orderly- transition."

to lead a national union in North America.[40] Though her political origins were in the Old Left, Hartman shared many of the same concerns as the feminist unions and others on the left-wing of labour. For example, she frequently excoriated organized labour, including her own union, for not respecting women workers; in 1971, while national secretary-treasurer, she told a CUPE audience that "the majority of working women will continue to turn their backs on unions until union leaders begin to treat them as persons with equal status."[41] She was also willing to work outside of the CLC, including when she orchestrated a CUPE Ontario hospital workers boycott of medical products produced by a company being struck by a Confederation of Canadian Unions (CCU)-affiliate. CUPE is a national, not international, union and Hartman joined with the CCU and other proponents of left-wing Canadian nationalism to publicly push for autonomy for the U.S.-based international unions operating in Canada.[42] A respected figure among social movement leaders and trade unionists, Grace Hartman and CUPE proved to be an important ally for socialist-feminists from within the CLC. Though mainstream labour on a whole failed to support the women's movement and its aims, CUPE and leaders like Grace Hartman were crucial supporters of both women's rights and militant unionism.

While the majority of union members in British Columbia and Canada were members of CLC affiliates, B.C. has been a hub for independent unions since the days of the Industrial

[40] Madeleine Parent said of Hartman "I couldn't tell you how a person like Grace, who was part of mainstream labour with its very right-wing leadership, was limited in what she could do, but within the women's movement my experience of her was that she was on our side. She was not always the most hard-hitting spokesperson but she would support the most hard-hitting spokesperson. She would add her reputation and credibility to positions we were taking and that was very important." (Crean, 138).

[41] Susan Crean, *Grace Hartman: A Woman for Her Time* (New Star Books, 1995) 136.

[42] Crean, 136; David Blocker, Labour and the Waffle: Unions Confront Canadian Left Nationalism in the New Democratic Party. *Labour / Le Travail* 87, (2021), 62.

Workers of the World (IWW) and One Big Union (OBU).[43] By the 1970s, a number of stable independent unions were operating in B.C..[44] Beyond supporting SORWUC's new organizing with financial contributions, these unions served as living examples of worker-run unions successfully operating outside of the watchful eyes of the CLC. In 1977, during SORWUC's correspondence with the leadership of the CLC regarding affiliation, Jean Rands wrote that "in British Columbia, a majority of women union members are in unions not affiliated with the CLC or the AFL - CIO. Consequently, SORWUC does not feel isolated from the 'main stream of labour.'"[45] Another union which supported SORWUC from within the CLC was the United Fishermen and Allied Workers' Union (UFAWU). Forced out of the Trades and Labor Congress (TLC) in 1952 due to its ties to the Communist Party of Canada, the UFAWU was very familiar with the perils and benefits of independence. Jack Nichol, union president, compared the CLC to "a protection racket" against raids and other forms of inter-union warfare between CLC affiliates. The CLC had nearly destroyed his union via raiding in the years prior to being readmitted in 1972.[46] As such, B.C.'s union of fishermen was well aware that "the Congress can

[43] Mark Leier. *Where the Fraser River Flows: The Industrial Workers of the World in British Columbia*. (New Star Books, 1990); Larry Gambone: *For Freedom We Will Fight: the Industrial Workers of the World in British Columbia 1905-1990*. (Black Cat Press, 2021).

[44] Among blue collar workers, Canadian Association of Industrial Mechanical and Allied Workers (CAIMAW), Canadian Association of Smelters and Allied Workers (CASAW), and the Pulp, Paper and Woodworkers of Canada (PPWC), all breakaways from U.S. based international unions, represented thousands of members and were keen supporters of SORWUC. Among white collar workers, the Association of University and College Employees (AUCE), the British Columbia Teachers Federation (BCTF), the Hospital Employees Union (HEU), and the Vancouver Municipal and Regional Employees Union (VMREU) were all independent and also supported SORWUC to varying degrees. The BCTF and VMREU had been independent since being established prior to World War II while the HEU disaffiliated from CUPE in 1970.

[45] The Bank Book Collective, *An Account to Settle*, 117.

[46] AUCE Provincial Special Convention on Affiliation, April 12-13, Box 8, File 7, Association of University and College Employees (AUCE) fonds, University of British Columbia Special Collections. https://open.library.ubc.ca/collections/auce/items/1.0385994

be as much a part of the Establishment as other parts of the Establishment…"[47] SORWUC, which had the support of UFAWU, was well-aware of the potential for problems with the CLC. However, by 1977, it desperately needed the financial backing of a large organization, which organizers believed would be forthcoming from the CLC based on shared interests.

Early on, the labour movement responded with donations, including from CLC and CCU-affiliates as well as independents.[48] The most generous unions, relative to their size and financial abilities, were those in the CCU as well as AUCE, SORWUC's sister union at the universities and colleges. However, many CLC-affiliates also stepped up, including eleven CUPE locals and seven International Woodworkers of America (IWA) locals.[49] Not all CLC unions backed SORWUC, however. Some were dismayed by their lack of affiliation to the CLC while others, Jackie Ainsworth recalled, seemed to let patriarchal interests supersede class-based solidarity. In one instance during the bank workers organizing campaign, she was invited to speak on behalf of SORWUC to an International Woodworkers of America (IWA) local in the rural community of Kamloops. In the meeting, she received pushback from IWA members who told her that "There is no way in hell my wife would make $1100 a month."[50] She later recalled thinking "I'm not sure they wanted all of those women organized and making all of that money."[51] Despite the prevalence of openly-patriarchal attitudes such as these, an influx of donations encouraged

[47]AUCE Provincial Special Convention on Affiliation, April 12-13, Box 8, File 7, Association of University and College Employees (AUCE) fonds, University of British Columbia Special Collections. https://open.library.ubc.ca/collections/auce/items/1.0385994

[48] The Bank Book Collective, *An Account to Settle*, 105.

[49] The Bank Book Collective, *An Account to Settle*, 26.

[50] Jackie Ainsworth interviewed by Thomas MacMillan, July 8, 2024.

[51] Jackie Ainsworth, interviewed by Thomas MacMillan, July 8. 2024

SORWUC that its efforts were backed by the larger labour movement, despite their lack of formal affiliation.[52] Along with the much needed cash-infusion, donations encouraged SORWUC that it had the backing of the larger labour movement, despite their lack of formal affiliation.[53] During the length of the organizing drive from the summer of 1976 to December 1978, 100 national and local unions, most of which were located in B.C., responded to SORWUC's fundraising appeals.[54]

With the support of many within the B.C. labour movement, SORWUC entered into a dialogue with the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) itself. Shortly after the CLRB ruling, SORWUC sent an urgent financial appeal to CLC headquarters. Initially cordial, the CLC noted that SORWUC had "created a national interest [among bank workers]."[55] The CLC's intentions quickly became apparent. SORWUC had begun organizing bank workers during the summer of 1976 and had already applied for certification at several banks in B.C. when the June 1977 ruling was issued. Shortly thereafter, the Canadian affiliate of Office and Professional Employees International Union, which had been awarded jurisdiction over all Canadian bank workers by the CLC, responded to SORWUC's certifications. The affiliate mailed leaflets to bank branches already organized by the feminist union. SORWUC believed that these leaflets were then "used by management personnel in their campaign to encourage bank employees to withdraw from membership in our union." In one case, it was forced to withdraw certification because

[52] The Bank Book Collective, *An Account to Settle*, 67.

[53] The Bank Book Collective, *An Account to Settle*, 67.

[54] The Bank Book Collective, *An Account to Settle*, 26.

[55] The Bank Book Collective, *An Account to Settle*, 115-116.

management was able to use the entrance of a new union to sow confusion.[56] In September, the CLC responded by declaring their support for the OTEU, writing that "you must understand that this organization is an affiliate of the Congress and has a long history of organizing employees in the banking and finance industry."[57] Later that month, the CLC announced that the aforementioned funding for ACTE, now totaling $1 million, would be used to launch its own campaign, called the Bank Worker Organizing Committee (BWOC). Just as the threat of being supplanted by the CIO forced the AFL to double its organizing expenditures between 1936 and 1941, so did the threat of SORWUC force the CLC to finally commit to organizing bank workers.[58] As historian Christopher L. Tomlins once wrote in relation to the United States, "structure followed strategy as unions altered their organizations in response to new threats."[59] The BWOC, however, learned little from the lessons of ACTE and SORWUC. Though it was coordinated by a 34-year old female staffer who had previously been a rank-and-file member of the BC Government Employees' Union, the campaign was top-down and staff-driven. The coordinating committee consisted of ten high-level union leaders, nine of whom were men, and only three of the ten unions had any experience organizing white-collar workers.[60] The Retail Clerks International Union and Office and Technical Employees Union, two CLC affiliates with

[56] The Bank Book Collective, *An Account to Settle*, 58.

[57] The Bank Book Collective, *An Account to Settle*, 116.

[58] Walter Galenson. *The CIO challenge to the AFL: a history of the American labor movement, 1935-1941*. (Harvard University Press, 1960) 598.

[59] Tomlins, Christopher L. "AFL unions in the 1930s: Their performance in historical perspective." The Journal of American History 65, no. 4 (1979): 1034.

[60] "CLC all set for national bank unionization drive," *National Post*, December 3, 1977.

experience organizing white-collar and/or bank workers, opted out of the coordinated campaign and instead launched their own separate drives.[61]

The entry of CLC-affiliated unions into the field of bank worker organizing immediately became an issue for SORWUC. In October, Rands complained to CLC leadership that:

> The effect of the entry of the OPEIU into bank organizing in B.C. has been to undermine, not strengthen, the attempts by bank workers to gain union representation. Anti-union management and supervisory employees now argue that the bank workers should check out the other union before joining SORWUC. Of course, these people are not OPEIU supporters. They are using the presence of another union as an excuse to delay unionization.[62]

However, the CLC continued to provide the OTEU and all other affiliates its full-backing while denying SORWUC any funding. Though SORWUC managed to certify 22 bank branches totaling over 400 dues-paying bank worker members, it faced mounting legal bills and a steep decline in support from CLC affiliates, putting it in an increasingly disadvantageous position.[63] In early December, CLC Secretary-Treasurer Jim Montgomery declared SORWUC “a rival organization.”[64] He told the *National Post* that "we're not going to bail out a union which is not an affiliate and isn't ready to play by the rules and join the organizing committee."[65] Though SORWUC had expressed an openness toward affiliating with the CLC, albeit in a manner which

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[61] Learning from SORWUC that workers with experience in the industry are most effective, the Canadian section of the Retail Clerks International Union hired 23 former bank workers to organize and claimed to have unionized seventeen bank branches as a result. "The Little Union That Couldn't," *Macleans*, September 4, 1978.

[62] The Bank Book Collective, *An Account to Settle*, 118.

[63] The number of members in good-standing, i.e. dues-paying, peaked in September 1977 with 422 members. In total, SORWUC signed up 733 total bank workers from the beginning of 1976 until the end of 1978. The Bank Book Collective, *An Account to Settle*, 107

[64] "Taking on the banks and the CLC" *The Vancouver Sun*, December 2, 1977, 6.

[65] “CLC all set for national bank unionization drive,” *National Post*, December 3, 1977.

would have preserved the feminist character of the organization, the labour federation cut off discussion and instead decided to move forward without it.

Nevertheless, SORWUC's success in British Columbia led to the union expanding to Saskatchewan in early 1977 when two tellers working for the Royal Bank of Canada (RBC) in rural Melfort reached out to the Vancouver-based union. Much like in B.C., the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour, and many of its affiliates, were open to working with SORWUC. In 1977, the SFL organized a conference for women trade unionists and invited SORWUC to speak. The Bank Workers Collective described the Federation as having "a history of struggle within the CLC to put the rights and interests of workers in Saskatchewan ahead of decisions by CLC leaders and national office leaders in Ontario."[66] The Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) was one of the CLC affiliates which backed SORWUC. The Canadian section of the formerly U.S.-based union had split in 1971 but, unlike those unions which joined the Confederation of Canadian Unions, maintained its CLC affiliation. RWDSU sought to organize the Saskatchewan's credit union workers and supported SORWUC's efforts to unionize Saskatchewan's bank workers. RWDSU was also a major financial donor to the effort, donating $3,000. When SORWUC's Jean Rands was invited to the province, she "met with representatives of RWDSU, CUPE, Grain Services Union, the IWA, and the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour and found a lot of support for SORWUC's campaign in the bank."[67] While progressive CLC affiliates backed SORWUC's nascent efforts to organize in Saskatchewan, the United Steelworkers of America (USWA) undercut these efforts.

[66] The Bank Book Collective, *An Account to Settle*, 61.

[67] The Bank Book Collective, *An Account to Settle*, 63.

After SORWUC had certified two bank branches and held an introductory meeting with a third, the USWA stepped in and convinced the Saskatoon-based bank workers to join their union instead. The Steelworkers claimed it was first approached by said workers while SORWUC claimed that the Steelworkers' representative "slandered and misrepresented SORWUC." While the facts of the certification were in dispute, both sides agreed that USWA had only intervened to prevent SORWUC from organizing.[68] The *Star-Phoenix* described the USWA's approach to the certification as "merely an interim one until the CLC directs how bank workers to be organized and by whom."[69] More generally, the CLC-backed effort went nowhere and, faced with better wages for non-union bank workers, in March 1980, the USWA-certified branch filed for decertification. Moreover, the newspaper asserted that the CLC had "made no direct effort in Saskatchewan to organize bank workers." The CLC left the organization of bank workers in the province up to the USWA and the United Food and Commercial Workers, which went nowhere. The Steelworkers even told the press that they were focused on mine workers in northern Saskatchewan, not the banks.[70] Like the effort by HERE to discredit SORWUC at Bimini, the Steelworkers undermined the fledgling union and left low-paid women workers without a union of any kind.

Though SORWUC was distrustful of the labour establishment, it quickly recognized that it needed a relationship with the CLC if it were going to beat the banking industry and establish a durable bank worker union. While affiliation with the Confederation of Canadian Unions (CCU) was always a possibility, the nascent confederation was unable to provide the kind of financial

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[68] The Bank Book Collective, *An Account to Settle*, 64-65.

[69] "CLC to consider bank question," *Star-Phoenix*, December 9, 1977.

[70] "Banks challenge trade union efforts," *Star-Phoenix*, March 29, 1980.

support needed to accomplish their goals. Only one body could, which was the CLC. However, SORWUC was established as an independent union "because women workers here concluded that existing unions were not structured to meet the needs of women in the unorganized private sector, and that CLC affiliates had not taken on the task of organization in that area." Like other feminist unions, independence was a key strategy. The principle behind it was self-governance or a determination "to run our own affairs."[71] Despite this, it initially seemed possible that the CLC and SORWUC could work together to organize bank workers. However, the CLC cited issues regarding overlapping jurisdiction. After contacting the CLC, SORWUC was told that it could only receive CLC support if it joined an existing affiliate or, in a best case scenario, became a directly charted local.[72] However, SORWUC's executive committee was willing to recommend affiliation only if it meant a "substantial financial contribution," as well as maintaining the feminist union "as a national organization."[73] SORWUC's sister union, AUCE, also sought to maintain its institutional integrity in a potential CLC affiliation.[74] Demanding institutional integrity did not seem farfetched to unaffiliated B.C. unions seeking a relationship with the CLC. The main reason given for not admitting AUCE and SORWUC was that other CLC affiliates already had jurisdiction over the workers they were organizing. However, in 1972, following two decades in exile, the CLC admitted two 'red' unions which had been expelled for links to the Communist Party. It may have also been linked to UFAWU's flirtations with the Confederation

[71] The Bank Book Collective, *An Account to Settle*, 117.

[72] The Bank Book Collective, *An Account to Settle*, 117.

[73] The Bank Book Collective, *An Account to Settle*, *117.*

[74] In June 1979, AUCE sent a letter to the CLC requesting affiliation. CLC president Dennis McDermott replied to AUCE's letter "I regret to inform you that unless your organization is prepared to adjust to the Congress structure, our answer must be in the negative." AUCE Provincial Special Convention on Affiliation, April 12-13, Box 8, File 7, Association of University and College Employees (AUCE) fonds, University of British Columbia Special Collections. https://open.library.ubc.ca/collections/auce/items/1.0385994

of Canadian Unions (CCU).[75] UFAWU and UE Canada's admittance to the CLC was a political decision made because of pressure from the British Columbia Federation of Labour.[76] Like UFAWU and UE, feminist unions also had jurisdictional overlap within existing CLC affiliates. However, a key difference was gender-based. As male-led unions, UFAWU and UE did not challenge the gendered norms of the CLC whereas feminist unions, led by young, assertive women demanding that the union movement take childcare and maternity leave seriously as core demands, found themselves to be outsiders despite their obvious trade unionist credentials. Thus, the difference between those unions admitted to the 'House of Labour' in 1972 and the feminist unions was likely political rather than structural. Moreover, SORWUC wondered how the United Steelworkers of America, a union with a jurisdiction focused entirely on blue-collar workers, could be permitted and even encouraged to organize bank employees; In a letter to the CLC, the United Bank Worker's president Charlotte Johnson wrote "Your letter states that SORWUC's jurisdiction is too broad and therefore a hindrance to Congress affiliation. Yet, the USWA, a Congress affiliate, has applied to the CLRB to represent bank employees in Saskatchewan."[77] Ultimately, SORWUC's bank worker members and their certifications were coveted by the CLC but not the larger union. This was because SORWUC's commitment to socialist-feminist principles as well as their flexible structure, both of which originated in the lessons of the women's liberation and anti-war movements, were not aligned with the hierarchical system which was pervasive in mainstream unions. Some criticized SORWUC for having an "ultra-

[75] "The sole reason for their readmission was, Congress leaders said privately, "to stop Rowley and Parent" - in other words the CCU. Relations between these unions and the CCU had been cordial; in the case of the fishermen, CCU membership was being considered. This was forestalled by the Congress' action." Rick Salutin, *Kent Rowley: The Organizer A Canadian Union Life.* Jamer Lorimer & Company Publishers, Toronto, 1980. 125-126.

[76] "Take fishermen back, CLC told," *Calgary Herald*, November 10, 1972.

[77] The Bank Book Collective, *An Account to Settle*, 123.

democratic" system of governance, to which SORWUC responded that it was necessary in order to "build a movement of women workers capable of organizing the private sector."[78] An investigator from the CLRB opined that he viewed SORWUC as "entirely different" from existing trade unions, saying: "I think they see themselves differently too - as an instrument of social reform rather than a bread and butter union."[79] While comments like these were intended to minimize the union's legitimacy, they also speak to socialist-feminism's broad reimagining of what the labour movement could accomplish. Thus, it was primarily due to political differences, not constitutional concerns, that the CLC refused to admit B.C.'s feminist unions as independent bodies.

It is unclear, perhaps unlikely, that SORWUC would have been successful at taking on the banks even with the backing of the CLC. Academics and organizers alike have noted how the post-war labour relations system makes large scale unionization of new sectors extremely difficult, if not impossible. Regardless, the turning point in SORWUC's campaign occurred when the CLC used its considerable power to block their efforts. Faced with the potential for an unsuccessful strike, lacking enough money to support strikers financially, and declining financial support following the CLC's efforts to block affiliate support, SORWUC's United Bank Workers voted to call off their organizing drive on July 13, 1978. The Bank Workers Collective later wrote "It was the most difficult union decision we had ever made."[80] Reflecting on the drive shortly after its failure, organizers cited the CLC's lack of organizing ambition, its structure, and lingering sexism for the national federation's oppositional approach to SORWUC. Ultimately,

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[78] The Bank Book Collective, *An Account to Settle*, 119.

[79] "Women Waving Red Flag of Unionism under Banks' Noses," *The Province*, November 13, 1976.

[80] The Bank Book Collective, *An Account to Settle*, 107.

they believed that having “to take on the labour movement” was a primary cause of their demise.[81] Jess Succamore of the Canadian Association of Industrial Mechanical and Allied Workers (CAIMAW) expected the CLC’s bank worker organizing effort to fail because the Congress did not “have the facilities or the people and cannot get the people committed to them.”[82] The CLC-backed campaign to organize bank workers was largely unsuccessful. By mid-1985, most branches certified with the United Bank Employees-CLC, had decided against unionization and formally decertified. Rosemary Warskett wrote that "unionized bank branch workers have had little to encourage them to remain unionized. Poor contracts, intimidation by the banks, and an apparent lack of support from their sisters in non-unionized branches have resulted in a steady stream of branch decertifications."[83]

Concurrent with the CLC-SORWUC bank worker organizing conflict was a struggle between the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees and Bartenders International Union (HERE) Local 40 and SORWUC Local 1. What began as a class-based struggle between SORWUC and management turned into a “male-female issue” with the CLC-backed HERE, Bimini’s male employees, and management on one side and striking women servers, SORWUC, and community activists on the other. HERE was widely regarded as a prime example of union

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[81] "Building a new union in an unorganized industry, we were bound to face incredible hassles on the job. We should not also have to take on the labour movement.” “But the established unions have not been involved in major organizing campaigns for decades, the structure of the CLC is not geared to organizing, and many men trade unionists are not yet convinced that women should earn wages comparable to theirs, or that their wives should spend evenings and weekends at union meetings."The Bank Book Collective, *An Account to Settle*, 113.

[82] “I think the enormity of the task was too much for any union without a base in the whole trade union movement, and I think that history will show that the CLC bureaucrats in Ottawa paid a disservice to bank workers in undermining SORWUC. Now that it's left to the CLC, I expect a repetition of what they did with ACTE (the Association of Commercial and Technical Employees) - nothing. They don't have the facilities or the people and cannot get the people committed to them." "SORWUC goes broke, calls off bank negotiations" *The Province*, August 1, 1978.

[83] Rosemary Warskett, “Bank Worker Unionization and the Law” *Studies in Political Economy* 25, Spring 1988. 61.

corruption and mob influence.[84] The Burnaby-based local 40 had approximately 12,000 members, primarily in hotels and bartenders. Nonetheless, it had not organized any of Vancouver's pubs and into this gap entered SORWUC. In early 1975, shortly after the Bimini pub opened, the feminist union had successfully organized a majority of the pub's 20 employees, most of whom were waitresses. As the first pub workers' union in provincial history, the effort attracted widespread attention.[85] Faced with an intransigent owner, SORWUC was unable to win a first contract after 10 months of negotiations so they went on strike on October 20, 1977. Mass picket lines quickly formed, which included both strikers and community supporters. The number of picketers peaked at 180 and the strike seriously impacted the pub's business. Nonetheless it stayed open with the support of the BC Pub Owners' Association in an effort to prevent further unionization.[86] At the beginning of the strike, seven of the twenty employees returned to work while thirteen continued to strike. Many of those who initially went on strike drifted back to work over the course of the next ten weeks until most of the staff were back on the job.

One of the leading scabs was the head bartender Victor Welsh. Strikers believed that the pub's male bartenders were close with management.[87] Welsh was initially anti-union and refused to become a member of SORWUC. After being in the minority during the certification and strike votes, Welsh crossed the picket line and continued to work. After weeks of effective mass

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[84] In 1984, the U.S. Senate permanent subcommittee on investigations concluded that organized crime had "substantial influence" in the international union. "Senate Probe Finds 'Substantial' Mob Ties to Hotel Union" *The Washington Post*, August 28, 1984.

[85] Smith, Julia, "An Entirely Different Kind of Union: The Service, Office, and Retail Workers' Union of Canada (SORWUC), 1972-1986" *Labour/Le Travail*, 73 (Spring 2014), 45.

[86] Smith, "An Entirely Different Kind of Union," 46.

[87] "Bartenders' union gives in to Bimini strikers," *The Province*, November 30, 1977, 29.

picketing by SORWUC and supporters, Welsh contacted HERE Local 40 because he believed that SORWUC focused too much on women's issues and, if a union was necessary, he wanted one "more capable of looking after us as a whole body."[88] He also believed that Local 40 would lower what he called irresponsible contract demands, leading to the quick settlement of the strike.[89] HERE organizers then crossed the picket lines and signed up the scabs. To justify their attempted raid, Local 40 accused SORWUC of being "a women's liberation organization rather than a trade union."[90] SORUWC's Pat (Christie) Barter condemned the raid, describing the action as "an intolerable display of trade union disunity."[91] HERE Local 40's vice-president defended the effort, stating "that's our field. It's been our field since 1900; we've been successful and we intended to continue to be successful because we're a monopoly. We're not going to tolerate another organization in our field. We're going to stop them every way we can."[92] Once the raid became public knowledge, forty-five SORWUC members gathered in downpouring rain to condemn HERE outside of their Burnaby office.[93] Two days later, Jack Munro, regional president of the International Woodworkers of Association and a BCFL executive board member, told reporters that "the lowest form of humanity that exists is a scab, and how any so-called respectable trade union can go and even talk to them, never mind sign them up, is a complete and total disgrace. They (Local 40) are acting as traitors to the trade union movement."[94] Munro offered his support to SORWUC and joined them on the picket line the

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[88] "Bartenders' union gives in to Bimini strikers," *The Province*, November 30, 1977, 29.

[89] "Union Could Be Expelled," *The Vancouver Sun*, November 29, 1977.

[90] "Inter-union battle shaping over Bimini," *The Province*, November 26, 1977, 35.

[91] "Inter-union battle shaping over Bimini," *The Province*, November 26, 1977, 35.

[92] "Inter-union battle shaping over Bimini," *The Province*, November 26, 1977, 35.

[93] "Union Now Fights Union in Bimini Pub Strike," *The Vancouver Sun*, November 26, 1977.

[94] "Bimini Strike Sets 'Scabs' Talk: Union Effort a 'Disgrace,'" *The Province*, November 28, 1977.

following day.[95] Rumors even circulated that Local 40 would be suspended or expelled from the BCFL if it did not withdraw its raid.[96] By standing up to HERE, the BCFL stood up to HERE and demonstrated the limits of inter-union rivalry, especially on the local level.

Faced with scorn for associating with scabs, Local 40 was forced to withdraw its certification bid.[97] The conflict then took on a familiar tone; Bimini's male workers were described by strikers as "taken care of" and "really close to management" while "women are treated like dirt."[98] With management and the largely male highest paid pub staff on one side, the divide between HERE and SORWUC had become "a male-female issue." Though the BCFL was forced to intervene to stop the raid, it warned SORWUC against "further inroads" on HERE's territory. Management also favoured HERE, with pub manager Doug Niemann telling *The Province* that "there are only five girls who want SORWUC. Are you going to let five girls run the country? Where's democracy?"[99] The strike ended in late December and a contract was imposed by the LRB in January. Though the contract was considered a good one, SORWUC was ultimately defeated. In an unusual step due to the brief time between the imposition of a contract and the decertification attempt, the LRB allowed the decertification campaign to proceed.[100]

While winning a decent contract at Bimini was necessarily a difficult task in the highly anti-union restaurant industry, the raid by HERE Local 40 was an unmistakable step towards

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[95] "Bimini Strike Sets 'Scabs' Talk: Union Effort a 'Disgrace,'" *The Province*, November 28, 1977.

[96] "Union Could Be Expelled," *The Vancouver Sun*, November 29, 1977.

[97] The raid was also believed to be in violation of HERE's constitution, which forbade any effort to assist an employer during a strike. "Bartenders' union gives in to Bimini strikers," *The Province*, November 30, 1977, 29.

[98] "Bartenders' union gives in to Bimini strikers," *The Province*, November 30, 1977, 29.

[99] "Bartenders' union gives in to Bimini strikers," *The Province*, November 30, 1977, 29.

[100] Smith, "An Entirely Different Kind of Union," 50.

delegitimizing a union representing precarious workers at their most desperate time. Occurring concurrently with the CLC's public declaration of SORWUC as a "rival organization," the Bimini raid undermined SORWUC's growth and stability. HERE sought to destroy the legitimacy of SORWUC in the eyes of men and women by declaring that "SORWUC is not a trade union but an association dedicated to one thing - the advancement of women."[101] It even went to the extreme of siding with management and latent appeals to male chauvinism to gain a foothold in the pub. While powerful leaders of mainstream unions like Jack Munro defended SORWUC's right to organize, HERE's short-sightedness undermined the larger labour movement.

For some working-class men, masculinity was tied to a shared interest between male employers and workers. As Ileen A. DeVault has written, "the hallowed words 'craft unionism' came to be read as 'male' perhaps even more than they were read as 'white.'"[102] In cases like Bimini, this principle should be extended to include employer-friendly unions as well. The prevailing patriarchal forces, including the head bartender, HERE leadership, and management were in agreement that SORWUC was illegitimate as a trade union, that it sought unrealistic and radical demands, and that the feminist union would not fairly represent male staff members. SORWUC's demands, however, were not particularly radical and included standard union issues, including higher wages, three weeks of paid time off yearly, and the creation of a union shop. Both management and Welsh falsely claimed that SORWUC sought control over the pub.[103] Going further, owner Peter Uram claimed a conspiracy was occurring, stating "I believe the

[101] "Union now fights union in Bimini pub strike," *The Vancouver Sun*, November 26, 1977.

[102] Ileen A. DeVault, *United Apart: Gender and the Rise of Craft Unionism* (Cornell University Press, 2004), 4.

[103] "Union Could Be Expelled," *The Vancouver Sun*, November 29, 1977.

union is using this dispute as a showpiece for other union members. The union is there for other reasons - not just to help my employees."[104] Paul Phillips, spokesperson for HERE Local 40, echoed these sentiments, stating: "SORWUC is not a trade union but an association dedicated to one thing - the advancement of women."[105] That a trade union should also be dedicated to advancing the cause of working women was apparently inconceivable for Local 40. HERE, while commonly called 'the bartenders' union,' claimed jurisdiction over all hotel and culinary workers. While both men and women were active participants in HERE, the exclusively male leadership's actions should be understood as defending a small, relatively privileged segment of the workforce against the 'intrusion' of assertive working women.

In short, unable to adjust to "an entirely different kind of union," the CLC committed what LRB chair Paul C. Weiler described as "a grievous self-inflicted wound" to itself and organized labour as a whole.[106] To SORWUC's leadership, the lack of solidarity displayed by the CLC likely appeared as another glaring example of patriarchy and denial of women's place within the labour movement. Infused with the spirit of the women's liberation, SORWUC was steadfast in its demand that working women would emancipate themselves and thus over-estimated their abilities at that time as well. In their 1979 book outlining the bank worker organizing campaign, the Bank Workers Collective called a union in the banks "an inevitability." It did not turn out that way and SORWUC, unable to recover its previous momentum, dissolved less than a decade later. SORWUC's organizers were skilled and their earnest appeals to democracy, women's rights, and self-governance matched the youthful rebellion of the era.

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[104] "They even keep the score in pint-sized war at pub" *The Province,* November 3, 1977.

[105] "Inter-union battle shaping over Bimini," *The Province*, November 26, 1977.

[106] Paul Weiler, *Reconcilable Differences: New Directions in Canadian Labour Law* (The Carswell Company Limited, 1980), 24.

However, they were unable to overcome opposition from the forces of management, the state, and establishment unions.

Conclusion

Nine to five, yeah, they got you where they want you;
There's a better life and you think about it don't you;
It's a rich man's game no matter what they call it;
And you spend your life puttin' money in his wallet
- "9 to 5" by Dolly Parton, 1980

That was our theme song. 9 to 5! Oh my god, we would sing that every Friday night.
- Ulryke Weissgarber, 2024 oral history interview.[1]

The working women's movement, epitomized by a "we can do it ourselves" ethos, exploded across North America and much of the world starting in the 1970s.[2] Catalyzed by the rapidly growing number of wage-earning young women, clerical workers and others in female-typed jobs organized and these efforts were soon reflected in popular culture. Two award-winning films debuted in 1979 and 1980 which are emblematic of these struggles. Opening in March 1979, the film *Norma Rae* features Sally Fields as the titular character. The film centres around the intersection of Rae's personal life and a union organizing drive. In its most poignant scene, she leads a shopfloor protest while demanding a union for her and her fellow textile workers. Her co-workers quickly recognize her bravery against the all-white and all-male group of bosses and police and respond by shutting down their machines one by one. For her portrayal of working women's courage, Fields won the Academy Award for Best Actress and the film itself was nominated for Best Picture at the 1980 Academy Awards.[3] The following year, a film and its theme song even more closely tied to the women's movement made a major cultural impact. The film, *9 to 5*, and the song of the same name performed by Dolly Parton, portray

[1] Ulryke Weissgerber, interviewed by Thomas MacMillan,

[2] Jackie Ainsworth January 28, 2017 Interview Transcript. *BC Labour Heritage Centre*. https://www.labourheritagecentre.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Jackie_Ainsworth_Jan_28_2017.pdf

[3] Robert Toplin "Norma Rae: Unionism in an Age of Feminism," *Labor History*, (1995) 36:2, 282-298

clerical workers who organize and take power from a misogynist male boss. Though it is a comedy, the film and its theme song demonstrate how working women can organize to overcome patriarchal bosses and improve their lives. Parton's song and its highly political lyrics were a hit with feminist unionists and are still sung on picket lines and wherever else workers, men and women, are fighting back, to this day. Though *9 to 5* was directly inspired by the organizing of Boston-based clerical workers, actress and activist Jane Fonda later wrote that:

> in the early 1970s, I began hearing from my friends in the 9 to 5 movement about the problems women office workers were facing...I decided to make a movie about what I was hearing, and I asked Lily Tomlin and Dolly Parton to join me...The movement built the movie, and the movie built the movement. That synergy was thrilling for all of us.[4]

The movement had a wide range of ramifications, including for those who never visited a picket line. I began this dissertation thinking about the lack of union protections for my mother and grandmother as they navigated the wage-earning world of New England in the half-century from the late 1950s when my grandmother began earning wage until my mother's untimely death in 2009. When my great-grandmother entered the workforce, she was an outlier; in 1930, only 27% of women were wage-earners in the United States.[5] By 1960, that number rose to 40% in New Hampshire.[6] When my mother entered the labour force in the early 1980s, she was part of the first generation which saw a majority of 52% who were wage workers.[7] While working women joined the labour movement in greater numbers due to increased participation, the number of women in private sector unions did not come close to keeping pace with the vast

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[4] Jane Fonda "Foreword" in Ellen Cassedy, *Working 9 to 5: A Women's Movement, a Labor Union, and the Iconic Movie*. (Chicago Review Press, 2022).

[5] "Women in the Workplace (Issue)", Encyclopedia.com, https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/women-workplace-issue

[6] Women Workers in 1960: Geographical Differences, U.S. Department of Labor Women's Bureau Bulletin 284, 1962, 5.

[7] Mitra Toosi, "A century of change: the U.S. labor force, 1950–2050," *Monthly Labor Review*, May 2002.

increase in the number of working women. Partially in response to this, the women's liberation movement identified the workplace as a site of oppression and, for the subjects of this study, the solution was to organize women in female-typed jobs into unions which could speak to their unique needs. While these trade unionists poured their hearts and souls into organizing, they ran into numerous barriers: labour laws often went unenforced or were found to be insufficient, the high point of social movement organizing had already passed, poor economic conditions led to aggressively anti-union employers, and male-led organized labour was slow to ditch its own conservative tendencies and adapt to working women as comrades. The record of feminist unions is impressive; among their accomplishments was the pioneering and defense of paid maternity leave (AUCE), spearheading the fight against pregnancy discrimination (SORWUC), injecting much-needed militancy into growing public sector unions (UWU-I), and leading the way on organizing non-profit workers and those in the care economy. Like most workers, the working women in my family were not directly involved in these struggles. However, by the end of their working lives, they were beneficiaries of the widespread implantation of these values which were spearheaded by working-class feminist activists. While most private sector working women are still without union protections, feminist unions were at the cutting edge of the movement to win increased representation as well as government-sanctioned workplace protections.

Marginalized workers of all genders, occupations, races, and ethnicities have turned to independent and/or alternative forms of unionism when labour's mainstream proved to be unresponsive to their needs. Two of the better-known examples include the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) which found a constituency with itinerant Western workers prior to World War I and the farm workers of Mexican and Filipino descent who formed self-governing independent unions following World War II. Since 1945, North American farm workers, clerical

workers, day care employees, home support staff, and student workers have been among the groups brought into the labour movement through self-organized independent unions. Despite this trend, only a handful of scholars have looked at independent unionism as a historical subject. Historian Erik Loomis wrote in 2023 that organizing independent unions has been, both in the past and present day, a "failing strategy" because "affiliation with an established union is the natural trajectory of an independent union campaign."[8] According to his logic, it seems that the length of time that a group of workers maintains independence is the key determinant into whether building independent unions should be deemed a success or failure. This dissertation, however, calls into question this argument. The success or failure of any union, be it affiliated or independent, should be judged by whether it meaningfully improves the lives of those who belong to it and contributes to the strengthening of the broader working class. Feminist independent unions, while lasting as independent entities for only a handful of years on average, made a lasting impact on the labour movement in a variety of ways. By uncompromisingly fighting for 'women's issues' during collective bargaining, feminist unions played a key element in labour's renewal starting in the 1970s. The feminist union movement's militancy has been a factor in improving both the working conditions of their members and the lives of countless other workers. As Seattle-based feminist unionist Monica Hill wrote in 1975, "independent unions today are fulfilling an historic responsibility to the entire labor union movement. We bring to it class consciousness, militancy, and demands for equality that organized labor cannot

[8] Contradictorily, Loomis cites several examples of when independent unions catalyzed organized labour, including his own experience at the University of Tennessee. "To take just one example, in the early 2000s, I was organizing at the University of Tennessee in what became the United Campus Workers (UCW), a union of any campus worker who wanted to join that became something of a model of how to organize in a right-to-work state where a union contract was effectively impossible." Erik Loomis, "Independent Unions: The Allure of a Failing Strategy," *New Labor Forum* 32, no. 2, 2023.

afford to ignore. By doing so, we strengthen the labor movement, as the part strengthens the whole."[9]

By emphasizing self-governance, skill development, and the cultivation of self-confidence among women workers, feminist unions trained and empowered activists who not only learned how to negotiate and enforce their own contracts but also continued fighting for social and economic justice in the subsequent years and decades. Mainstream unions were keen to capitalize on the relative success of feminist unions, which led them to hire several leaders as staff organizers. For example, Peggy Schima, once a leading member of SORWUC's Powell River Homemakers local, was hired by United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) with which she led an effort to organize over 2,000 home support workers in British Columbia.[10] Mary Anne Massenburg, once a clerical worker at California Rural Legal Assistance (CRLA) and a leader of United Legal Workers of California (ULWC), was hired as an organizer by District 65 / United Auto Workers. For decades, Massenburg worked as a staff organizer, during which time she aided union organizing across California, including a major role in the twenty-year effort to organize teaching and research assistants across the University of California system.[11] In both above cases, the affiliation agreements included clauses for hiring one or more leading members as full-time organizers. Feminist unionists also continued their fight outside of the labour movement. For example, Monica Hill of the United Workers Union-Independent (UWU-I) in Seattle took a position with Radical Women, traveling to Los Angeles to help begin a chapter. While there, she organized against white supremacy, campaigned to protect abortion

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[9] Monica Hill, *Why Independent Unions?* Radical Women Publications: 1975.

[10] "Why are Home Support Workers Members of UFCW 1518?" UFCW 1518, YouTube, accessed April 15, 2025.

[11] Mary Ann Massenburg, interviewed by Thomas MacMillan, June 10, 2025.

rights, and other left-wing issues.[12] Others, like Yolanda Alaniz, Lois Danks, and Henry Noble went on to hold leadership and/or organizing positions within the Freedom Socialist Party, Radical Women, and other radical organizations over the next decades where they continued to fight against war, sexism, and labour exploitation. Oral history interviews show that feminist unionists have continued to devote themselves into left-wing movements until the present day, including the development of worker-owned and consumer cooperatives, anti-war and environmental activism, and beyond. The experiences of feminist unionists in the 1970s strengthened the North American Left.

Another legacy of feminist unions is how they acted as conduits for the needs of working women and, through their struggles with mainstream labour, helped institutionalize women's demands in the broader labour movement. Perhaps the clearest example of this was the widespread adoption of paid maternity leave. Prior to AUCE Local 1's first collective agreement in 1974, no union in Canada had collectively bargained for fully-paid maternity leave. The inclusion of unemployment benefits for working mothers in the Unemployment Insurance Act had only occurred three years prior and it was unclear if it was even legal to negotiate for that provision at the time. However, Local 1 successfully won paid maternity leave in their first contract and defended it in future collective bargaining negotiations. The union also had to ward off an attempt by the Canadian government to 'claw back' payments from working mothers. Once they were successful, the larger forces of the women's and labour movements took notice. This led to the broader women's movement, in combination with progressive unions like the Canadian Union of Postal Workers and the *Front commun* in Quebec, building off of the successes of B.C. feminist unions and winning paid maternity leave in their own contracts in

[12] Beverly Beyette, "Radical Women Return to the Barricades of the Left," *Los Angeles Times*, February 22, 1990, E7; Monica Hill Interview, July 9, 2024.

1979 and 1981.[13] The success of these unions then led to federal and provincial governments to incorporate maternity leave into public policy. Thus, what started as a bargaining demand on the UBC campus put forth by socialist-feminist office workers belonging to a newly organized feminist union eventually became public policy across Canada.

Scholars of marginalized workers, including Immanuel Ness, Vera Weghmann, and Davide Però, have noted in recent years that successful campaigns among these workers have decentered established institutions and instead prioritized independent and alternative forms of unionism based on class struggle. *New Forms of Worker Organization*, edited by Immanuel Ness, takes a global view of syndicalist and autonomist unionism, highlighting "the alternative means workers are pursuing to advance their own interests through self-organization [which] are more relevant to today's workers than institutional and bureaucratic compromises with the capitalist state."[14] Vera Weghmann builds off of Ness and describes the independent unions built in the 2010s in the United Kingdom as having

> reinvigorated worker-led militancy, moving away from the emphasis on recognition and collective bargaining. Their success, evident in a myriad of disputes, has been their challenge to the bureaucratic and risk averse behaviour of traditional organisations and their emphasis on recruitment, recognition and partnership models. Moving beyond trade union territorialism, they have actively created communities of resistance that amplify the struggles of low paid, migrant workers.[15]

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[13] No studies prior to this have linked AUCE Local 1's 1974 contract with later breakthroughs. However, Julie White has written several works about the incorporation of maternity leave demands within mainstream unions. Julie White, *Mail & Female: Women and the Canadian Union of Postal Workers* (Thompson Educational Publishing Inc, 1990), 149-163. Julie White, *Sisters & Solidarity: Women and Unions in Canada* (Thompson Educational Publishing Inc, 1993), 90.

[14] Immanuel Ness, *New Forms of Worker Organization: The Syndicalist and Autonomist Restoration of Class Struggle Unionism* (PM Press, 2014), 1.

[15] Vera Weghmann, "Theorising practice: independent trade unions in the UK," *Work in the Global Economy* 2: no. 1 (July 2022), 146.

Però also finds that "indie unions emerged to compensate for the inadequate support that established unions - despite an inclusive rhetoric - offered migrant workers in conditions of high precarity, exploitation, exclusion and oppression."[16] He demonstrates how United Voices of the World brought an end to the outsourcing of cleaning services at the London School of Economics through a decades-long campaign. This was accomplished outside of what Però calls the "institutionalist conceptualization of organizing that is centred on larger established unions."[17] Just as feminist unions emerged in the 1970s because of the failures of organized labour, so did migrant-led independent unions in the 2010s. While some scholars, looking solely at the United States, have dismissed independent unions as a failure, an increasing number of scholars, including myself, regard alternative unionism as a logical and oftentimes successful possibility given the existing state of mainstream unions and the end of the post-war labour relations accord between management and workers.

This project began during the COVID-19 pandemic, a period coinciding with a wave of independent union organizing. In April 2022, the independent Amazon Labor Union (ALU), shocked observers by winning a representation election at the JFK8 warehouse in Staten Island, New York and thus became the first recognized union in the stridently anti-union company's history. ALU President Chris Smalls immediately announced that his union would maintain its independence in the wake of its surprise victory stating "I got to be with the people that was with me from day one. We want to stay independent, and it's better that way. That's how we got

[16] Davide Però, "Indie Unions, Organizing and Labour Renewal: Learning from Precarious Migrant Workers," *Work, Employment and Society* 34, no. 5 (2020), 905.

[17] Però, 901.

here."[18] Independence was a key feature of ALU's successful campaign.[19] In the aftermath of this victory, dozens of organizing drives were announced at institutions large and small. A month after the successful vote in Staten Island, grocery store workers at a Trader Joe's in Hadley, Massachusetts announced their intention to organize "ALU style."[20] Later that month, other grocery store workers at the New Seasons Market in Portland, Oregon publicized their petition for an election with the NLRB, declaring that "we are proud to follow in the footsteps of ALU in recognizing that worker-led independent unions are the best way for today's workers to be represented at the bargaining table."[21] Other drives sought to unionize corporate giants, including Chipotle, Geico, Google, Home Depot, IKEA, REI, and Target. The independent union wave caught on among less conventional union targets, such as student workers employed by Iowa's Grinnell College, exotic dancers and political staffers working for the New York City Council and in the offices of United States Congress members. These drives made headlines, with *The Christian Science Monitor* wondering: "Independent unions are having a moment. But are they here to stay?"[22] *In These Times* wrote that "Independent Unions Are Great—And Proof of Labor's Broken Institutions."[23] The most widespread and successful organizing drive occurred at New Seasons Market chain in Portland, Oregon. Just like in the 1970s, the West Coast was a

[18] Luis Feliz Leon, "Amazon Workers in Staten Island Clinch a Historic Victory" *Labor Notes*, April 1, 2022.

[19] In June 2024, ALU members voted to affiliate with the International Brotherhood of Teamsters. As of September 2025, no contract had been signed. Michelle Chapman and Haleluya Hadero, "Amazon Labor Union members vote overwhelmingly in favor of an affiliation with the Teamsters," *Associated Press*, June 18, 2024.

[20] "We are doing this ALU style." @TraderJoesUnite via Twitter, May 14, 2022, 6:40pm

[21] @NSLU_PDX via Twitter, May 27, 2022, 5:15pm.

[22] Luke Cregan, "Independent unions are having a moment. But are they here to stay?" *The Christian Science Monitor*, August 29, 2022

[23] Hamilton Nolan, "Independent Unions Are Great—And Proof of Labor's Broken Institutions," *In These Times*, September 19, 2022.

bastion of independent unionism; approximately half of the publicized independent union drives during this period occurred in Washington, Oregon, or California. Inspired by the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and the success of the organizing drive at Amazon, New Seasons Labor Union in Oregon successfully won NLRB certifications at eleven stores, totaling one thousand total members. At the time of writing, NSLU has been in contract negotiations for years with New Seasons Market and, in August 2025, the union affiliated with the United Electrical Workers (UE), which is also independent.[24]

While it remains unclear if the New Seasons Labor Union or the dozens of other independent union drives launched during the COVID-19 pandemic will win contracts which win long-term improvements to working conditions, veterans of the feminist union movement of the 1970s would be familiar with their struggles. As the preceding chapters have shown, organizing campaigns, especially those done independently of established labour unions, bring into view the power capital has over the collective rights supposedly guaranteed in our theoretically democratic systems. Even when workers follow established processes and legally win the right to union representation, it has been shown that businesses, large and small, have been able to grind down vulnerable workers through years of delays, promises, and confusion. Regardless as to whether independent unions are able maintain their strength under fiercely anti-union circumstances, categorizing independent unions as strategic failures belies a fundamental misunderstanding of the problem. Independent unions do not need to maintain their independence in perpetuity in order to serve a purpose. By challenging existing unions to be more inclusive, democratic, or militant, new independent unions have made space for their constituencies within the labour movement while also stimulating older unions to put a renewed

[24] Anna Del Savio, "New Seasons workers at store on Woodstock dump union," *Northwest Labor Press*, September 8, 2025.

focus on organizing. In the present day, the labour movement in North America badly needs to re-invest in organizing. As union researcher Chris Bohner has shown, the 21st-century has seen a steep decline in the funds allocated to organizing by the AFL-CIO. Writing in 2022, Bohner noted that despite pledges of increased funding, the organizing budget of the largest federation in North America would "not even approach the levels of investment a decade ago [2012]."[25] As organized labour seeks to renew itself in the years ahead, rank-and-file workers, social movement activists, and union leaders would be wise to learn from the 1970s when a previous generation of feminist independent unions challenged the status quo under the catalyzing ethos of “we can do it ourselves.”

[25] Chris Bohner, “Labor's Net Assets Rise by $3.5 billion in 2021 while AFL-CIO Pledges ‘Unparalleled Investment’ in Organizing,” *Radish Research,* October 18, 2022. https://radishresearch.substack.com/p/labors-net-assets-rise-by-35-billion

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