

# MAKING TIME FOR EQUALITY



This is **the first of three articles** based on the findings of an independent research project called **“Leadership, Feminism and Equality in Unions in Canada,”** led by union and community activists Linda Briskin, Sue Genge, Margaret McPhail and Marion Pollack. The series explores where the labour movement stands today on women’s equality issues, and is based on conversations with about 50 women activists, leaders and staff from public and private sector unions, central labour bodies, and eight different provinces. The conversation included racialized women, lesbians, women with a disability, Aboriginal women, and women from a range of age groups.

The questions posed in this article are: Has our union movement succeeded or failed in opening its doors, and keeping them open, to representative and strong women leaders? How can we move forward?

The project’s four leaders found that the women they spoke with (who were promised anonymity) shared their own optimistic belief that organized labour can continue to play a critical role in challenging women’s inequality. As one activist said, “The trade union movement is one of the few organizations in society with the capacity to make changes on behalf of working people.” On the other hand, another said: “Unions are institutions that can either push forward on social change, or hold it back.”

Welcome to a cross-country check-up on how women union activists feel the movement is doing on women’s equality issues. The authors hope this series helps the Canadian labour movement continue to push forward in its efforts to make itself even more inclusive. – *Our Times*



## Women as Leaders in the Canadian Labour Movement



PHOTOGRAPH: COURTESY ERIC LUNN

Many of the women on the Radio Shack Strike Solidarity Committee in 1979 were also members of the Ontario Federation of Labour's Women's Committee. Left to Right: Deirdre Gallagher, Carolyn Egan, Linda Yanz, Shelley Acheson, Mariane Holder, Mary Shane, Susan Ballantyne, Edith Johnston, Wendy Cuthbertson, Marian Tobin.

By Linda Briskin, Sue Genge,  
Margaret McPhail,  
Marion Pollack

*"I hopefully opened the doors for other women to move into leadership positions, because it's stupid not to, quite frankly. Are you going to be president and then leave with no other women there? It makes no sense. If I have inspired any women to get active in the women's movement/union movement, I think that's great."*

– Nancy Riche

**W**HEN WOMEN BEGAN ORGANIZING TO WIN equality in the Canadian labour movement in the 1970s and early '80s, we fought for our unions to take up issues such as equal pay, child care, violence and harassment against women, and reproductive choice. We argued for women's committees and caucuses, women-only conferences and courses, dedicated funding and staff. But we also knew that to move women's equality into the mainstream, we needed women in central leadership positions.

Grace Hartman, who became president of the Canadian Union of Public Employees in 1975, was the first woman to hold the top position in a Canadian union. Not noted for mincing words, she recognized the barriers to women's equality, saying, "Unions can be just as discriminatory as employers, just as discriminatory as tax laws, just as biased in favour of men as the rest of society."

Other progressive, feminist women leaders have been elected since Hartman: strong advocates such as Nancy Riche, as a long-serving executive vice-president and secretary-treasurer of the Canadian Labour Congress; Judy Darcy, as president of CUPE; Deborah Bourque, as president of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers; and Nycole Turmel, as president of the Public Service Alliance of Canada. These are only a few examples of those who stepped up to become central leaders and, just as importantly, used their position to further women's equality in the labour movement.

### THAT WAS THEN

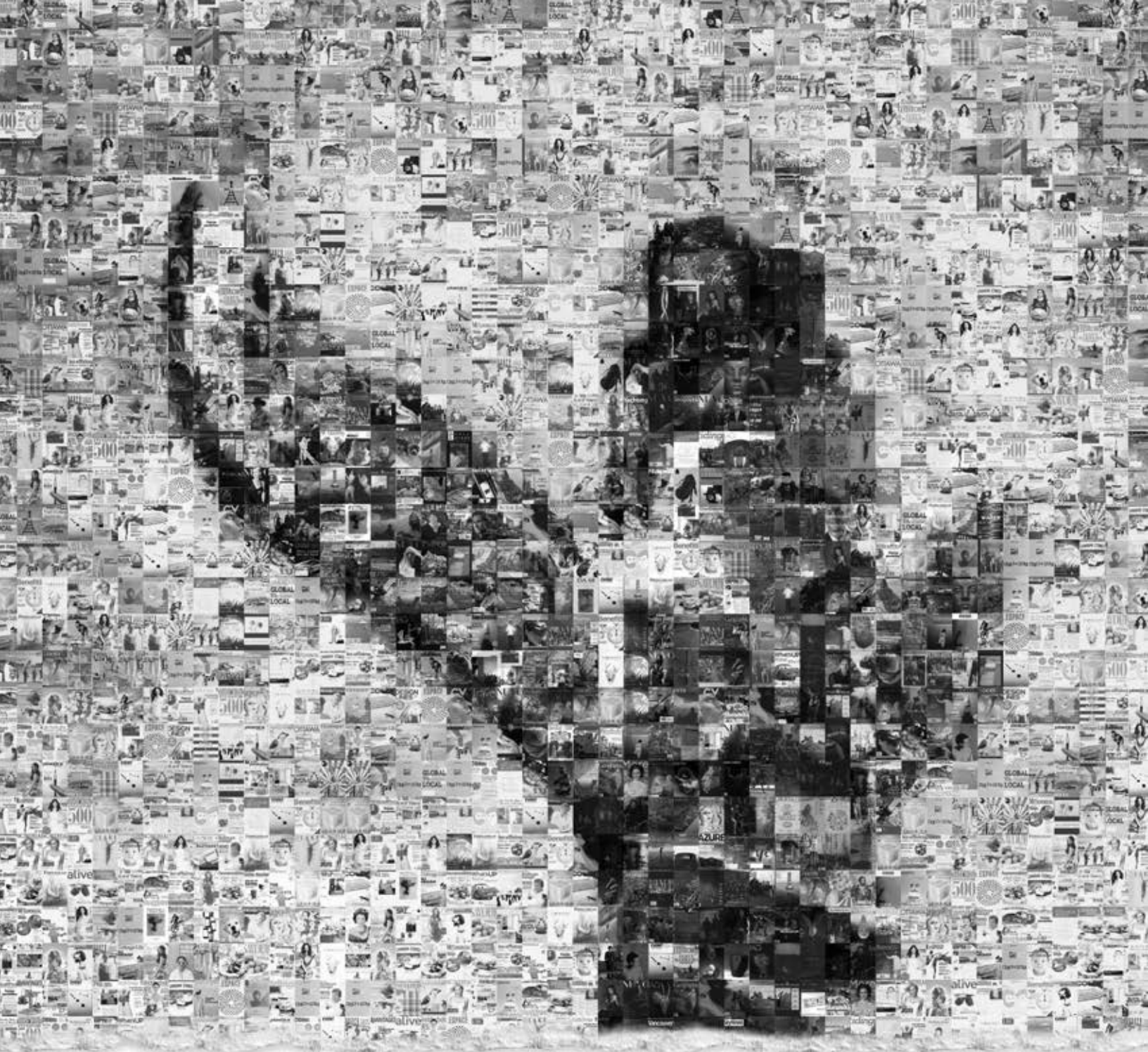
But this early momentum has not lasted. Women now make up 53 per cent of union members in Canada, and union density for women has been higher than men since 2004. Still, most high-ranking union leadership positions continue to be held by men, even in unions where the membership is predominantly women. The pattern that men move into the top positions while women remain in secondary levels is still widely accepted. (Said one project participant: "It just seems like the 'girl jobs' are these sort of secretary, treasurer jobs, and then the boys get to be the presidents.")

For Aboriginal women, racialized women and women with disabilities, the picture is worse, with very few in leadership or staff positions. Those who are there spoke of getting little support and, in some cases, facing overt hostility. Project participants also noted a lack of concerted efforts to recruit and mentor union sisters from equality-seeking groups.

### THE BARRIERS ARE STILL REAL

"The older women I talked to were resigned and felt that there really hadn't been anything changed in a long time," said a partici-





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PHOTOGRAPH: COURTESY CUPW

Deborah Bourque (front, second from left) was national president of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW). Here, she is with the union's first national women's committee (1991).

pant. "There's been no change in attitudes within our union or in our society as a whole, so it's like we're at a standstill." Indeed, significant barriers continue to block the way for women as union leaders.

One is the expectation that being a "true trade unionist" still means being available around the clock. Women who are unable or unwilling to work this way are seen as less committed than their male colleagues.

Take bargaining, for example. Bargaining is a core function of unions and a key point of entry for leadership and staff positions. Yet, it remains dominated by men and a masculine style of negotiating. Not surprisingly, the number of female negotiators is low. "I remember bargaining back when I had young children," recalled a participant. "I was bargaining around the clock. You couldn't do it any other way. And who says you can't do it any other way? You don't have to do this model of combat through the night: wearing everyone down and whoever survives the longest gets to an agreement."

These expectations make no allowances for balancing union involvement with the obligations of personal life and family responsibilities. Many younger union sisters are supportive of their unions, but are not prepared to abandon partners, children, or life to union work. Some decide not to become active; others choose to wait until later in their lives. Either way, unions are losing out. Says another participant in the project: "The challenge for us is: How do we see women taking on greater responsibilities in the labour movement and still juggling the family? That's one area we need to put some thought into: saying to the younger women in those child-bearing years that there's a place for them."

Women with children and families often feel guilty about not being available for union work 24/7. And environments that are not women-friendly are

stressful. Many women leaders are separated by time or geography from the support provided by personal networks. The isolation that can be experienced by women in top positions is reinforced by the fact that there are so few of them. "The one word I've used to describe my position," says one, "is 'lonely.' You end up being very isolated and people know you're busy so your friends don't call as often. You need somebody to call you up on a bad day and say, 'You know, I was just thinking of you.' Those kind of things that, as we become leaders, people think we don't need."

### MACHO CULTURE

In our conversations, women highlighted the continued dominance of a male-centred union culture and masculine leadership style. Macho yelling/bullying/table-pounding is still seen as strong leadership, even in unions with a mainly female membership. Women, whose leadership style is more likely to be based on relationship building, communication and collaboration, frequently cannot find a place for themselves as leaders, and feel pressure to conform. Said one participant: "How we define leadership and how we expect leaders to behave doesn't seem to fit with our feminist philosophies. Lots of women expect their leaders to have sort of 'male' traits. They don't seem to value an inclusive way of doing things, genuinely respecting other opinions and differences, and working through conflict in a way that respects people."

Social activities continue to be structured around men's interests, such as gatherings in bars or on golf courses. ("I've seen the glass ceiling and it's made out of golf balls," Nancy Riche famously said at a CLC women's conference in the 1990s.) Women are often not invited, and do not feel included even when they do join in. Although these activities are costly, time-consuming, and conflict with family



Photo by Vincenzo Pietropaolo

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responsibilities, many women feel they must take part in order to avoid being marginalized. ("You're never in the inner circle, never invited to the room where they have free liquor. Every time you go to a hotel, it's a hotel that has a golf course attached. More men golf than women; they obviously seem to think it's okay to do that during the day.")

At the same time, it is difficult for individual women leaders to address the issues and inequalities they experience without coming across as "whiners." "What I found with most of the inequality," says one woman, "was that it was subtle. And when I tried to confront it, I was told I was 'overreacting,' which I'm sure a lot of women hear."

### A CLIMATE OF DISRESPECT

Our conversations revealed a disturbing level of harassment towards, and disrespect of, women leaders. Union sisters spoke about a culture of fear, and the chilling effect on emerging activists.

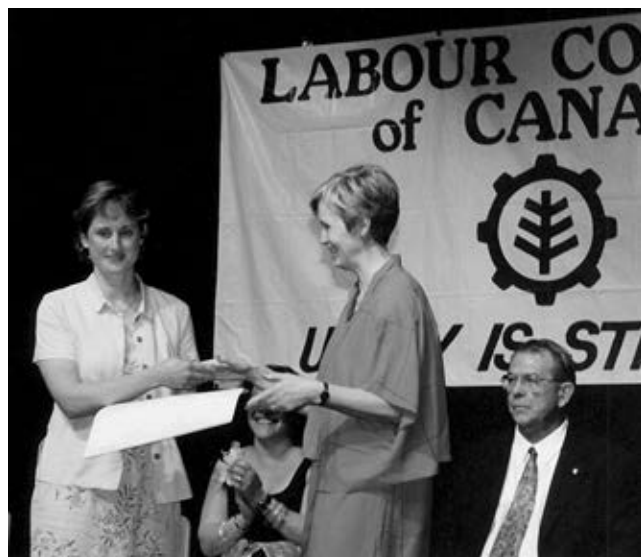
Says one woman who is in a leadership position, "I saw some of the women looking at me, saying, 'I know now I will never be in that position.' They couldn't imagine having to put up with that. They didn't think they would survive it. I saw it on their faces."

As project coordinators, we experienced this anxiety firsthand when women who had initially expressed great interest in the project decided not to participate because of the consequences they might face. ("Women I have worked with for years are basically ducking for cover. They won't challenge the bullying because they don't want to be targets.")

A shared perception is that outspoken women are frequently undermined and dismissed. Women leaders talked about limits on their roles and autonomy, being ignored in discussions, and excluded from key meetings. "As a leader," said one, "there has been very little respect for me from the top and that disrespect has trickled its way down over the years. Others are now being treated disrespectfully, particularly racialized women."

Women of colour, Aboriginal women and young women spoke about isolation, dismissal and marginalization. Many are discouraged by union hierarchies and disrespect. Younger activists have seen the toll exacted by such harassment and are not prepared to live with it. We heard from many participants that racialized and younger women are choosing to work in community groups, which they find more welcoming. ("Speaking as a racialized woman, I know that racialized women have said, 'You know what? We're tired of being marginalized if we challenge the labour movement, of being completely written off and having whatever we're putting forward being completely undermined.'")

Cyberbullying of individual women leaders and staff was identified as a new and pressing concern. Online attacks frequently focus on a woman's sexuality, personal relationships and moral character. The speed and range of circulation, as well as the ability



PHOTOGRAPH: COURTESY CUPW

Nycole Turmel (centre), former president of the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC), said of her time in office: "I wanted equity-seeking groups to be recognized and for women to have a place in the labour movement."

for bullies to remain anonymous, takes this harassment to a new and dangerous level. Said one: "People feel freer to attack women in very much more personal ways than they attack men."

### UNIONS NEED STRONG WOMEN

We cannot underestimate the toll these barriers take on our personal health and collective well-being. We appreciate women sharing these disturbing experiences with us and helping to break the silence. And we are reminded of a comment by suffragist Nellie McClung: "Disturbers are never popular — nobody ever really loved an alarm clock in action, no matter how grateful they may have been afterwards for its kind services!"

These are difficult issues, but women activists know that sharing experiences is the basis for finding collective solutions.

### DOORS MUST BE OPENED, AND STAY OPEN

A consensus emerged among the women activists who took part in this project that building a critical mass of feminist leaders is necessary to advance the equality agenda and transform union culture. (Said one participant: "Leaders set directions, they make decisions about resources and how money is going to be allocated, what requirements are going to exist in the unions. Leaders can establish quotas and requirements for things like training programs. They can be champions.") Strong women leaders demonstrate to other women that it is possible to take on leadership roles. Women activists look to these leaders for mentoring, support and guidance. But there are still too few shoulders and too many responsibilities.

So where do we find the next generation of leaders? Participants pointed out that while there are fewer women "at the top" than before, many are in



"The sisters were always there," said Nancy Riche (right, under banner) to *Our Times* in 2003, after retiring as secretary-treasurer of the Canadian Labour Congress. "They will never know how they helped me maintain my sense of humour, and hope." FRONT (left to right) at the 1996 Women's March Against Poverty, in Vancouver: June Veacock (Ontario Federation of Labour), Sunera Thobani (National Action Committee on the Status of Women), Angie Schira (B.C. Federation of Labour), Louise Hinton (UFCW Canada), Nancy Riche (CLC), Judy Darcy (Canadian Union of Public Employees), Frances Lankin (Ontario NDP MPP, Ontario Public Service Employees Union).

leadership positions in their local unions. Some of them have already played prominent roles in labour's fightback campaigns. The library workers' strike in Metro Toronto in 2012 is one such example — a woman-led union took on the mayor and strategically positioned the strike to build links between public support for the library system and job security for library workers. ("I'm heartened by the fact that, where there has been really good, militant, progressive action, it's often where there are a lot of women involved. . . . And women may not be participating as much at the top levels of leadership . . . but, at the local level, women are engaging.")

Unions need to encourage and mentor racialized, Aboriginal and young women and really listen to and respect their views. We all have a lot to learn. Said a participant: "I see these young women activists . . .

who are really smart and progressive and engaged. And, by and large, the majority of them would identify themselves as feminists, but not quite in the same way I think my generation did, and does."

Collectively, we need to support women leaders by speaking up and breaking the silence about harassment. One voice can easily be dismissed. Many women raising issues of disrespect and bullying are harder to ignore. ("What we had [in the past, was the] development of a critical mass of women activists that were willing, collectively, to say things out loud and make their demands in their unions. . . . We have to start talking with other feminists in our unions and start building that critical mass again, of women who can stand up together and say these things out loud.")

Unions used to work on work/life issues. These

questions must be raised again and again, as part of ensuring greater representation and equality for women inside unions. Unions need to develop an extensive campaign and strive to be model institutions in this regard. ("What the labour leaders don't get is if we don't start talking about these things we are going to be irrelevant. It's in their best interest that they should pay attention to this stuff.")

#### EQUALITY IS ESSENTIAL FOR UNION RENEWAL

The current economic and political climate poses real challenges for union renewal and growth. With a workforce and membership that is increasingly racialized and female, promoting equality is often sadly not understood as a critical component to the revitalization of the movement. (Said one activist: "When we say, 'Listen, we can't have a discussion about union renewal without talking about equality,' [we're told], 'We don't have time to talk about equality. We have to talk about saving unions, saving workers and saving jobs.' The conversation about equality gets put on the backburner because the people who are at the decision-making tables don't see that equality is part of that strategy.")

The loss of younger and racialized and Aboriginal women is a loss for the labour movement. It should raise red flags about the repercussions for renewal and growth and the very future for unions. There are all kinds of possibilities, if our movement only knew. ("Once we have the possibility of recognizing people's voices, asking people to speak, and opening up spaces, there's an incredible diversity there. There are all kinds of possibilities of world views, ideas and experiences.")

#### WHAT COMES NEXT

These issues are challenging. But collectives of women across the country are beginning to organize. Union Sisters in B.C., started in the late '70s, has begun meeting again. Gatherings are planned in Saskatchewan, Toronto and Ottawa. In December 2012, the Ontario Federation of Labour's Women's Leadership Summit looked at some of these issues. The conversation has begun. The union movement needs to pay attention.

*"Nothing is won without effort. You fight — it's a constant political battle. Your support depends on the women's support. You win in the labour movement by getting votes. You don't win by kowtowing to the men, you win by building the political strength of the women."*

— Nancy Riche

**LINDA BRISKIN** recently retired from teaching in the social science department and the School of Gender, Sexuality and Women's Studies, at York University, where she was a member of the York University Faculty Association (YUFA). She is currently working on a project on collective bargaining, social dialogue and gender equality for the International Labour Organisation (ILO) of the UN.

**SUE GENGE** is a long-time activist in the women's and labour movements. She recently retired from the Canadian Labour Congress, where she led the CLC's work on LGBT issues, pay equity, violence against women, and women's leadership development.

**MARGARET MCPHAIL** is a retired secondary school teacher and member of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF). She has been active on equality, labour, and education issues for many years, both inside the school system and in the community.

**MARION POLLACK** is a retired postal worker and a long-time activist in the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW).

For more information about the project "Leadership, Feminism and Equality in Unions in Canada," visit their website: [www.womenunions.apps01.yorku.ca/](http://www.womenunions.apps01.yorku.ca/).

See more quotations by Nancy Riche at the website called "Women Social Activists of Atlantic Canada: Profiles of Wisdom": [www.etc.lib.unb.ca/womenactivists](http://www.etc.lib.unb.ca/womenactivists).


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