

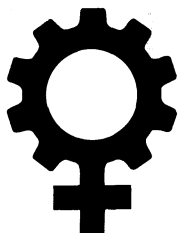
travailleuses dans les sphères syndicales, politiques et sociales qui les concernent.

Je crois cependant avoir démontré que l'aliénation des femmes est la cause directe de leur désintéressement de la vie politique. Le système dit que l'intérêt central de la femme (son rôle de

femme!) doit être la famille. Le système fait en sorte que la femme, avec conjoint et enfants ou non, se tienne loin de tout intérêt autre que celui de la famille. Les femmes sont condamnées aux 'idées pauvres', la politique et l'engagement actif étant l'apanage exclusif des hommes.

## SORWUC

Frances Rooney



L'article qui suit fait le bilan du travail d'un syndicat qui tente d'organiser les femmes qui travaillent dans les bureaux. Les organisatrices ont rencontré de l'hostilité de la part et des patrons et des syndicats déjà établis.

Women in unions? Yes, Virginia, there are women in unions but... sixty-five per cent of women in the labour force are not unionized. Most unions ignore or discriminate against part-time workers; an élite, removed from the membership, dominates many unions; members often have no direct say in decision-making and it goes without saying that the labour-union movement is overwhelmingly male-oriented and male-dominated.

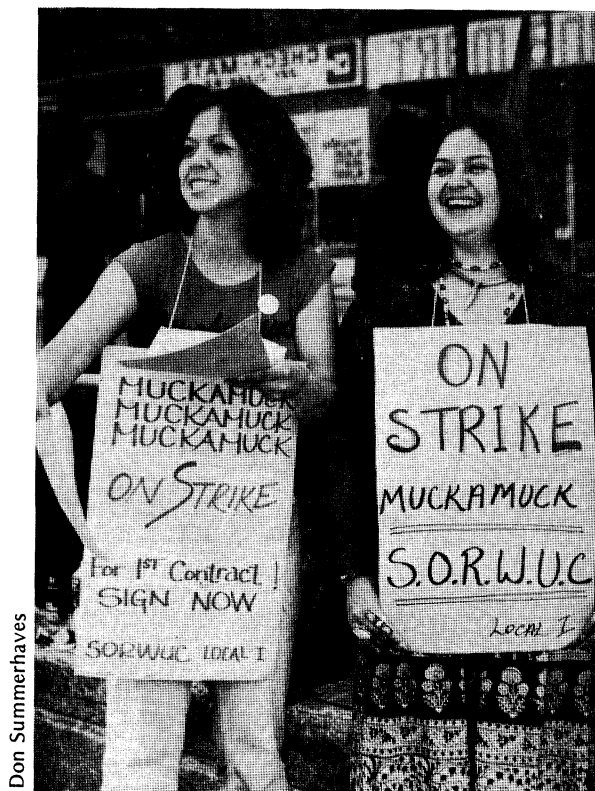
SORWUC (the Service, Office and Retail Workers' Union of Canada) is doing something about all those things. The now six-year-old union grew out of the Vancouver Working Women's Association. Its purpose is to organize workers in retail stores, banks, restaurants, and the other service trades—those predominantly female occupations which have always been ignored by the traditional trade unions. Because SORWUC's twenty-four founders were tired of insensitive hierarchies and were aware that women need to learn about the workings of unions, they designed the SORWUC constitution specifically to prevent the growth of a highly paid professional bureaucracy. All important decisions are voted on by the entire membership through referendum ballots mailed to the members' houses. All officers are elected annually, and there is a limit to the length of time any person may hold office. And all local bargaining units are autonomous: each unit retains control over every aspect of negotiations, and the members of each unit write and negotiate their own contracts.

For the first year after certification by the B.C. Labour Relations Board, SORWUC's one bargaining unit consisted of the employees of a small legal office. Since 1974, Local 1 has come to represent several social-service agencies, other offices, restaurants, and day-care centres. In addition to the usual provisions concerning job security, promotions, and wages, the SORWUC contracts have included several provisions designed to meet the needs of working people who must also function as members of families and of their communities. These include work weeks as short as 32 hours; full pay for maternity leave; two weeks' paid paternity leave; an extra hour at lunch-time, paid, once a month to allow women with families to participate in union meetings; protection and prorated

benefits for part-time workers; and personal rights clauses prohibiting dress regulations, performance of personal chores for employers, and that most familiar function of the 'office wife', getting coffee.

SORWUC is working to evolve policies to improve the quality of the life of working people. One area of study is child care: 'We want to explore the possibilities of unions having more control of day-care centres and child-care facilities. A union of parents/working people will care for its children as industry/government never will.' Policy proposals presented to the SORWUC National Convention in February 1978 included free 24-hour child care; centres which the child can reach by her/himself and, when necessary, free transportation for both parent and child; nonsexist, nonracist training for child-care workers and salaries at parity with those of school teachers and the funding of these facilities from corporation profits. Underlying these policy proposals, which contain a statement of the rights of children, is SORWUC's view that children are part of society and, as such, are the responsibility of society as a whole.

SORWUC's first strike took place at Bimini's, a neighbourhood pub in the Kitsilano area of Vancouver. The owner, who was the newly installed president of the B.C. Neighbourhood Pub-owners Association, decided that he was 'rich enough and anti-union enough to hold out to the end'. During the ten



Don Summerhaves

weeks of the strike, he hired scabs, whom the American-based Hotel, Restaurant and Bartenders Union then signed for membership in their own union. This group then applied to the B.C. Federation of Labour to have SORWUC decertified as the bargaining agent. The request was denied, the BCFL supported SORWUC, and other unions gave their support. Unionists and women's groups joined SORWUC members on the picket line and they were able to gain customer support to the extent that Bimini's business decreased by eighty per cent. The 'end' turned out to be a first contract which dramatically decreased management's arbitrary power, gave workers a say in scheduling, and increased the base wage from the B.C. minimum \$3.50 an hour to \$5.03.

Perhaps the most powerful 'establishment' industry in this country, and traditionally one of the most mystifying to women, including its own employees, is the banking industry. Until recently most women bank employees believed that they could either accept the oppression of their jobs within that industry or leave it: they believed that it was against the Bank Act to unionize. When some of these women discovered that they could in fact legally organize, they began to look for a suitable union. They ended their search with SORWUC. During the summer of 1976, eleven bank branches in B.C. joined SORWUC. They became the core of a separate and autonomous local, the United Bank Workers, SORWUC local 2.

When deciding whether these branches could be certified as a bargaining unit, the Labour Relations Board had to decide what constituted an appropriate bargaining unit. The banks wanted the CLRB to rule that all the branches within each nationally chartered bank should function as a single bargaining unit. SORWUC argued that so large a unit would effectively prevent employees from exercising their right to unionize, and that the individual branch should be the bargaining unit.

In its landmark decision, the CLRB ruled in favour of the union. 'The express intention of Parliament,' it wrote in its decision, 'is the encouragement of free collective bargaining'. . . . Too large units in unorganized industries will abort any possibility of collective bargaining ever commencing and defeat the express intention of Parliament.'

SORWUC had the go-ahead to start organizing the nation's 145,000 bank workers, three-quarters of whom are women. By February, 1978, twenty-four branches had been certified and negotiations had begun. Proposals, upon which all members had voted by referendum ballot, included a base pay rate of \$1,140 a month (arrived at by calculating the basic living needs of a single parent with one child, without either savings or a car), four weeks' holiday in the first year, a 35-hour week, voluntary rather than required overtime at double pay, promotion on basis of seniority and ability, and prorated benefits for part-time employees.

1978 was a hard year for many women's organizations. SORWUC was no exception. While gaining twenty-two bargaining units in B.C. and two in Saskatchewan, SORWUC had to fight eighteen appeals by the banks. Lawyers' bills rose to \$28,000. The union gained the support of over eighty unions, but it had incurred the enthusiastic opposition of some of the largest unions on the continent, including the US-based Office and Professional Employees International Union; the Hotel, Restaurant and Culinary Employees and Bartenders Union, and the United Steelworkers of America.

Nor has the Canadian Labour Congress been of any assistance. When SORWUC learned that the CLC had 'large sums of money set aside specifically to organize office workers', it wrote and requested a donation. The CLC supports only its own affiliates, so SORWUC did not qualify for their funds. The CLC did, in a correspondence riddled with condescension and patronization,

oppose SORWUC's tactics as 'wasting time and money' and suggested that SORWUC might want to meet with the CLC 'to enter serious discussions with a view to entering the mainstream of labour'. (Since SORWUC works to organize those members of the labour force most ignored by existing organizations, the definition of 'mainstream' is singularly confusing). Shortly after the acceptance of SORWUC's branch-by-branch plan, the CLC itself began organizing bank workers. It also supported its affiliate Office and Technical Employees Union in its organizing activities. Then, in what was in fact a divide-and-conquer tactic (whether or not it was intended as such), the CLC offered to accept the United Bank Workers, but not SORWUC as a whole, as an affiliate. The head of the CLC bank workers' campaign, Laraine Singler, has been quoted as saying that 'SORWUC did tremendous work but won't be able to sustain it. The United Bank Workers should join our co-ordinated effort to organize people in the financial sector.' This, of course, cuts the lines of organization very differently from the way SORWUC's founders and members intend. Jean Rands, former national president, put it this way: 'We don't think working women should be divided up. Bank workers shouldn't see themselves as completely apart from other working women, from waitresses. Many problems are the same.' One of the most obvious of those problems, in unions as elsewhere, is that 'people' means men and 'women' means getting the coffee.

CLC predictions that SORWUC wouldn't be able to sustain its efforts turned out to be both right and wrong. The people, most of them volunteers and many of them SORWUC supporters from the days of WWA, didn't give out, but the money did. While SORWUC worked, did all the groundbreaking, the banks and the CLC waited. Now, SORWUC has backed out of bank organizing and others have taken over.

Bimini's is once again a problem. Management has convinced many of the workers that it is to their disadvantage to belong to a union and they have applied to have SORWUC decertified. They will probably succeed.

Another strike, at the Muckamuck restaurant, staffed by about twenty native people, has now been going on for several months. The restaurant has been sold, and it is suspected that it may not reopen.

Despite these disappointments, though, this has been in some ways a very good year. The union executive has had to be expanded to meet growing demands. Organizing is mushrooming in three provinces, and inquiries have been flowing in from all over the country. There is a very real sense that, though still a small union, SORWUC has in the last year gone from being a Vancouver and vicinity union to being in many ways a national one. SORWUC supporters, in the Native community, among women's groups, and in several areas all over B.C., have never been as numerous or as strong. Women's knowledge of unions and sophistication at negotiating to meet their needs continues to grow. The longer that goes on, the more women find that they can go after what they want and need, the greater will be the momentum the union will build. And, despite the increased opposition it will encounter, the more difficult it will be to defeat. WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO ABOUT IT, VIRGINIA?

For more information:

*Kinesis*, the newspaper of the Vancouver Status of Women Council, provides regular coverage of SORWUC activities, as does *Priorities*, the NDP Women's Committee feminist/socialist publication. The Vancouver *Sun* and *Province* also provide surprisingly favourable coverage. Esther Shannon wrote a very fine history of SORWUC in the April 1978 issue of *Upstream*, and the union will provide information on request (enclose postage and enough to cover duplicating costs, if you can—my request, not theirs). Their address is #1114, 207 W. Hastings, Vancouver, BC V6B1K2, or phone (604) 681-2811 or 684-2834.