

ALLIANCE BUILDING TO CREATE CHANGE: THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT AND THE 1982 CUPW STRIKE

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ABSTRACT

Social movements are significant to change mainstream ideologies and values over what is seen to be critical for society. The women's movement helped to change ideas about women and their roles in society. One significant change, for more universal maternity, only occurred through the alliance with CUPW. This paper will illustrate that the alliance between the women's movement and CUPW was significant to change public opinion and help to gain paid maternity leave for the majority of working women in Canada. In sum, the power these two groups generated in alliance produced one of the most important social benefits we currently enjoy as Canadian citizens. As a result, alliances are powerful and should be used to further any movement to towards equality.

INTRODUCTION

Questions about who is responsible for child rearing have been hotly debated for at least five decades. The Canadian women's movement has been engaged in these debates since the 1960s. Hoping to gain ground on the parental rights achieved in 1971 when the Unemployment Insurance Act (UI) was initially liberalized, women's groups put the issue of paid maternity leave at the centre of their call for women's equality. In 1981, the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) sought to improve parental rights for their members during contract negotiations and, in so doing, joined the larger fight for women's rights. This paper will argue that the alliance between the women's movement and CUPW, and by extension the Canadian labour movement in general, was the most important of the tactics employed to generate public support for paid maternity leave for all Canadian women. While the Association of University and College Employees in British Columbia and the Quebec Common Front had already won paid maternity leave for their

members at a provincial level, without the power of the alliance between labour and women's groups during the CUPW strike of 1981, paid maternity leave for all working women across Canada may not have been achieved. Today, as we reconsider the alliance between labour and women in the early 1980s, I argue that it may serve as an instructive example of the importance of strong and committed alliances, as the rights of all workers are increasingly under attack.

THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT PRIOR TO 1981

The decades prior to 1981 saw a major increase in consciousness about, and demand for, women's rights via the rise of the women's movement (Black 1993). Generally regarded as among the most significant and successful social movements of the last century, the women's movement at this time was an active, often grassroots, movement to change society by bringing about equality between the sexes. Beginning in the early 1960s, the second wave of feminism sought to challenge entrenched notions of womanhood, the sexual division of labour, inequitable laws against women, and insufficient social services offered to women (Adamson *et al.* 1988: 3, 27; Luxton 2001).

During the 1960s and '70s, the fight for women's equality in Canada involved generating widespread public criticism about the lack of UI maternity protections, even as the Canadian government claimed to be working to improve the status of women. For instance, in 1973, the federal government signed on to the United Nations' Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and promised to begin to introduce paid maternity leave. In 1976, the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women, a group formed by the federal government in 1970 to examine women's issues and public policy, recommended that all employers should make up the difference between the UI maternity benefits and their employees' regular wages (White 1990: 158). The Royal Commission on the Status of Women (RCSW), established in 1967, heard many briefs from unions about the need for strengthened maternity leave provisions.

While the conventional view is that primarily middle-class women were involved in the women's movement at this time, this was not the case in reality. As Pam Sugiman (1994: 156) notes, within the women's movement, "a 'distinct trade unionism' emerged in the 1960s." While Sugiman was referring to women in the auto sector, it is fair to argue that women across the labour movement were also gaining a voice. By 1981, over 50 percent of women were in the workforce, yet they were frequently given jobs that earned less than men and kept from advancing through the ranks (Luxton 2001: 68). While women were beginning to gain a voice, they were still discriminated against; as Julie White (1993) notes, sexism within the union movement has been present since its earliest incarnations in the 1880s. White emphasizes that, as women's work in the

home had historically been ignored and used as an excuse to bring down men's wages, when women joined unions, their concerns were often ignored. Women union members were generally "under-represented on central and local executives, in committees [especially bargaining committees], at conventions and in staff positions" (White 1993: 119). This tendency was well established by the 1960s when women began to insist that their specific experiences as women workers be acknowledged (Luxton 2001: 69). White (1993: 123) points out that women's organizations outside the labour movement became the "critical base of women's activity inside the union movement" during this period. Slowly, more progressive unions started to take on women's issues. For example, in 1964, the United Auto Workers had its first conference for women workers, supporting women's calls for equality (Luxton 2001: 69).

UI AND MATERNITY BENEFITS PRIOR TO 1981

When the Unemployment Insurance Act was liberalized in 1971, maternity leave was added as a form of financial support to pregnant workers and those who had recently given birth (Pulkingham and Vander Gaag 2004: 116). In this way, the UI program was positioned as a form of social policy and legitimated the idea that paid maternity leave should come directly from the government. At this time, a woman working in CUPW, or any where else for that matter, had the option to receive UI maternity benefits if she became pregnant. Pregnant women would receive 15 weeks of UI coverage after a two-week waiting period and were allowed only six months off without pay from their employer (Porter 2003: 125). Men expecting children fared poorly as well: they only received one paid day off for either the birth or adoption of their child (White 1990: 150). The UI program was strict in its rule that the recipient must have been employed at the time of conception. In addition, if a woman had 20 insurable weeks of work, she also had to fulfill the "magic 10" rule (Porter 2003: 124). This rule was intended to ensure that the pregnant worker was an active member of the labour force for 10 weeks between the 30th and 50th week prior to child's birth (White 1990: 150). If a woman fit the "magic 10" rule, she would receive 60 % of her income to a maximum for 15 weeks (White 1990: 150).

In the late 1970s, women both inside and outside the labour movement began to focus specifically on the discriminatory aspects of UI policy. Many women were found ineligible for benefits due to harsh restrictions in the Act (Porter 2003). White outlines three cases of UI maternity problems that received public attention at the time. The first example involved teachers who were not permitted to claim maternity benefits in the summer months because they were not considered employed. The second, in 1976, involved Pacific Western Airlines' dismissal without pay of two pregnant flight attendants during their fourth month of pregnancy. The women fought back on the basis of the Canadian

Labour Code—a struggle that took two years in court but was unsuccessful (White 1990: 157). The third case produced the most public support. Stella Bliss attempted to appeal Section 46 of the UI Act, which denied women the ability to access regular UI benefits while pregnant based on the assumption that they would not be available for work. Bliss was not able to access UI maternity benefits due to the “magic 10” rule. She was not working at the time of conception but did work for much of her pregnancy, so she applied for regular benefits six days before her due date, arguing that she was available for work at the time of her application (Porter 2003: 133). She was denied benefits and then attempted to fight the ruling, taking it all the way to the Supreme Court of Canada. In June 1978, they denied her claim (White 1990: 157–58). All three of these cases created more public support for maternity benefits and for women’s organizations, and facilitated the women’s movement’s demands for greater equality for women, specifically in the workplace.

CUPW INITIATES A FIGHT FOR PAID MATERNITY LEAVE

At the same time as women’s groups such as the National Action Committee on the Status of Women¹ were attempting to have the issue of paid maternity leave addressed by the federal government and private employers, a large public sector union, the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW), was attempting to negotiate a new contract and had identified paid maternity leave as a bargaining goal.² While CUPW had attempted to have this issue addressed in previous contract negotiations, historically it had been traded off for other gains (White 1990: 159). In the 1981 bargaining round, the union demanded a 20-week full wage maternity leave, asking the employer to top up the UI benefits of 15 weeks and provide full coverage for 2 weeks prior to birth and 3 weeks post birth. When these demands were sent to the Treasury Board (the employer), no negotiations occurred. Rather, the Treasury Board maintained its family package already in place in some public sector union contracts and in non-union federal government employees. This package included up to 26 weeks of unpaid leave and payment during the second week of the UI waiting period. There was no additional support beyond the basic UI program for expectant parents (White 1990: 151).

CUPW JOINS THE WOMEN’S MOVEMENT

The growth of the women’s movement led to growing alliances with differences within groups including the CUPW. Nancy Adamson, Linda Briskin and Margaret McPhail (1988: 71, 79) argue that the late 1970s and 1980s brought a more “public character” to social movements as they recognized the importance of organizing collectively and creating alliances with a large variety of groups

and individuals. Multiple levels of social marginalization experienced by women, including class position, race and gender, intersect with and condition each other³ but also make it difficult to organize across different groups and movements. Often, just as one concern was addressed, another challenge emerged in its place (Lee and Todd 2006: 145). For instance, unions addressed the need for part-time worker protection, who were commonly women. This in turn led to the need for gender-related support like maternity leave (Luxton 2001). Building political alliances was seen as challenging but crucial, however, as power grows with numbers and in making common cause with others (hooks 1986: 138).

In order to create public support for the forthcoming strike, CUPW President Jean-Claude Parrot reached out to 500 women's groups, asking for their support and attempting to forge alliances with them (Parrot 2005: 144; Kainer 2008: 16; White 1990: 152, 153; Lee and Todd 2006: 145). The women's groups responded positively to his request by holding rallies, demonstrating for CUPW, holding press conferences and pledging to join CUPW picket lines in the event of a strike (Kainer 2008: 16). Women's groups also ran editorials about paid maternity leave and phoned in to talk shows to discuss the issue, helping to create greater visibility and more demand for paid maternity leave (Parrot 2005: 145). Illustrating the women's movement's emphasis on public demonstrations, for instance, the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC) demonstrated in front of South Central postal plant in Toronto and held press conferences coinciding with the CUPW strike within Toronto and Halifax to further this demand. The NAC also called for help from the public and created an educational leaflet on the issue of paid maternity leave. This leaflet indicated supporters of this provision as well as calling for women to join the movement through indicating the needs for this provision (White 1990: 155). Women's groups further sent letters to the press and the government articulating their need of maternity leave (White 1990: 155), which led to articulation of this need within the media, as discussed in Roswitha Guggi and Bert Hill's piece "Parrot dead set on Maternity Leave", which appeared in the *Ottawa Citizen* on July 24, 1981. During the CUPW strike, an Ottawa women's group also joined the picket lines to show their support, arguing for "Treasury Board – It's Time to Deliver" which further reinforced Parrot's commitment to ensure the success of this right within the strike (White 1990: 155).

CUPW called for a strike vote in June 1981 and 84 percent of members voted in favour (Parrot 2005: 145; White 1990: 155). Treasury Board President Don Johnston continued to argue that the union's demands were simply too costly (Parrot 2005: 144). Many hypothesized that the Treasury Board was concerned that the demands for maternity leave would spread to other parts of the public and private sectors (White 1990: 155). As no terms could be reached at the table, CUPW went on strike June 29, 1981. Eventually, after a protracted strike lasting

42 days, the two sides agreed on 93 cents on the dollar to be paid in maternity leave wages. The employer also agreed to pay the full amount of the employee's wage for the first two weeks of the leave, and to top up the UI benefits for the next 15 weeks, granting their female employees 17 paid weeks of maternity leave (Stewart-Patterson 1987: 190; Parrot 2005: 305). When CUPW members returned to work on August 12, 1981, they were the first national union to win this concession from the federal government and succeeded in paving the way for more widespread paid maternity leave to be granted across Canada (White 1990: 156, 149).

WOMEN'S MOVEMENT TACTICS: DEMONSTRATIONS, MEDIA SAVVY, AND THE POWER OF A STRATEGIC ALLIANCE

A particular social movement's tactics are usually determined by the resources available to them. The movement must then determine which tactics would be most useful to achieving their desired outcomes (Mondros and Wilson 1994: 148). The Canadian women's movement employed several different kinds of tactics in order to achieve paid maternity leave, including individual measures, public demonstrations, the use of media, and the formation of strategic alliances. I argue that making a strategic alliance with CUPW and other labour organizations was certainly the most effective of all the tactics they employed; thus tactics will be explored.

Bill Lee argues that public demonstrations held to call attention to a problematic issue can accomplish a number of important things. They can show that a community is powerful and can overcome oppression; they can demonstrate that large numbers of people are involved in the issue; they can temporarily disrupt the oppressive power of the dominant group; or, they can involve a combination of all of the above (Lee 1993: 100-101). Obviously, the women's movement recognized these advantages in their fight for maternity leave. Through public demonstrations, the women's movement was able to take their case to the broader Canadian public, show high degrees of community involvement and strength in numbers, and attract media attention to their cause.

The use of different forms of media was also a central tactic of the women's movement during this struggle. While it is always important to be aware that the media may not convey a message the way a group might prefer, media outlets can be used to rally public support around a cause and disseminate important information about an issue. A good media strategy should always involve tailoring press releases to multiple media outlets on both the left and right of the political spectrum (Lee 1992: 106). White (1990: 155) notes that various women's groups submitted press releases to major media outlets, called in to radio talk shows, and wrote editorials about the issue in major newspapers during the fight for paid maternity leave. And, of course, once CUPW became involved in the

issue and the threat of a nation-wide mail strike was created, the women's movement was guaranteed widespread coverage for its cause.

However, by far the most effective tactic employed by the women's movement at this time was the formation of an alliance with CUPW around the issue of maternity leave. In addition to the increased public and media attention the alliance garnered for women's issues in general, women's groups benefited from new people joining their ranks as a result of this alliance. Even male members of the labour movement began to pay attention to women's causes as a result of the CUPW strike. As Adamson *et al.* (1988: 79) argue, at this time, many women's rights activists felt that making alliances with trade unions was an important strategy, and these allied struggles often involved large public strikes. Public strikes were appealing as tools for social change because, as Eric Shragge (2004: 45, 15) notes, there is "power in numbers to disrupt and shut down institutions and to win concessions through this process."

This particular alliance between the women's movement and CUPW as it engaged in a strike, with maternity leave as one of its central demands, helped to re-engage the public character of both of these movements. It helped to connect a wider range of women who may not have otherwise have been involved to this strategic cause. For instance, as mentioned above, a group of women created an organization in Ottawa to support the maternity demands laid out by the CUPW strike. This same group demonstrated in conjunction with the strike in July of 1981, suggesting, "Treasury Board – It's Time to Deliver" (White 1990: 155). Because maternity leave was configured as a part of a labour demand and not as a general social demand, it also brought many men onside who might otherwise not have been supportive. The benefits of the alliance were mutual: by building alliances with women's groups, CUPW would have more power at the bargaining table and, as a large and important union in Canada, could play a role in changing social policies that might improve the lives of all Canadian women. In this way, what might previously have been perceived as a "women's only" issue became a labour issue and, by extension, many new people became aligned with and sympathetic to the women's movement.

Not all members of the labour movement approved of these tactics by CUPW and women's rights activists, however. For instance, in all 14 CUPW locals this issue was controversial and led to a lot of opposition. Some men argued that they did not benefit from it, while older women articulated that they have done without and therefore did not see the importance of this provision. Furthermore, even women were seen by some to benefit from this provision for only a limited timeframe. At the time of the strike, as few as 250 out of 23,000 members were likely to be affected by this benefit (White 1990: 160). As Meg Luxton (2001: 69) notes, "the majority of unions ... reflecting the prevailing sexism of the times, had not given particular support to women workers." Reflecting this lack of

support, many CUPW members questioned whether a strike over maternity leave was worthwhile (White 1990: 160).

As Anne Bishop (2002: 145) argues, building alliances is centrally important in political struggles against systematic oppression. The women's movement comprehended this notion and saw this as an opportunity to join and defeat this oppression. Clearly, the women's movement had a presence within CUPW as a result of the agitation of its female members, and because of this, the union was responsive to the overtures of women activists on the outside. CUPW's female members also allied with their sympathetic union brothers and helped forge the alliance to external women's rights advocates. Bishop (2002: 111) argues that a key characteristic of an ally involves the ability to understand "power-with" in contrast to 'power-over.' Good allies also have a solid understanding of the world and its social structures and are clear about their collective responsibilities. In the alliance between the women's movement and CUPW, both groups understood the importance of paid maternity leave for all of Canadian society. Both groups were implicated in a larger process of social change for Canadian women and families and both knew they were stronger together than apart in their fight to bring it about.

The women's movement chose to form an alliance with CUPW because of its power, in terms of its ability to influence its environment, as a public sector union. CUPW's position at the time in relation to the issue was unique, and certainly as a major public sector union it commanded the attention of a wide array of stakeholders (Lee 1992: 15–18). They had valuable information that indicated that the federal government was vulnerable on the moral question of women's rights and fearful of extending paid leave to all public sector employees (White 1990: 155). CUPW's membership was also large and stretched across the country, giving it the potential to affect the national debate (Lee 1992: 15–18; Shragge 2004: 15; Mondros and Wilson 1994: 50). Moreover, CUPW had the power to bring the country's postal service to a halt and, by doing so, negatively impact the economy. Union leader Jean-Claude Parrot had status and recognition within the labour community and was in a position to push loudly and publicly for the rights of the CUPW members.

However, it is also important to note that women like Marion Pollack, who was active in both the women's movement and CUPW, were strategically central to the introduction of these demands and their transformation into rights. Parrot's decision to continue with this demand was influenced by the demands of women within his organization and beyond. Clearly, the growing female membership of the union, as well as the increasing participation of women, including mothers of young children, in the paid labour force, put pressure on Parrot to win paid maternity leave. Within the labour force, in 1981, 46.4 percent of all women were working, while 72.8 of all men were working. The total labour force participation of both genders is 60.1 percent (Statistics Canada

CANSIM Table 282-0002). Within CUPW, in 1965 only 619 workers were women, while 23,025 workers were men (White 1990: 10). By 1975, women were 29 percent of all CUPW members, which further climbed to 44 percent by the end of 1980s (White 1990: 53). Thus, while the numbers of men still outweighed that of the women, there was a growing need for this form of provision. In sum, the various forms of power—money, information, numbers, and status—wielded by CUPW added much needed resources and moral weight to the claims of women for equal rights and recognition under the law. The decade of effort by the women's movement combined with labour interests to bring about paid maternity leave across the public sector; together, these two interests helped to turn the “power against the powerholders” those with control to modify this need (Moyer 1987: 158).

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

In order to create change, social movements like the women's movement often set benchmarks for each step of the process. Four types of goals can characterize work for social change: long-term results, short-term results, long-term progress goals and short-term process goals. Long-term goals include a movement's desired end results, while short-term goals are often referred to as 'objectives' and involve the partial fulfillment of long-term goals. Process goals involve reaching desired outcomes which will help the movement attain final goals (Mondros and Wilson 1994: 135–37).

In the case of the women's movement's broader struggle, paid maternity leave for CUPW can be seen as a long-term process goal insofar as it aided the movement's long-term goal of achieving social equality for all women. The women's movement had been trying to achieve paid maternity leave for quite some time and was not making any progress on the issue prior to the alliance with CUPW. At the time of the 1981 CUPW strike, the Treasury Board President Don Johnston was concerned that if CUPW gained this provision it would spread to the rest of the public sector and so he resisted it; however, as Parrot noted, “what's wrong with that?”(quoted in White 1990: 155). In fact, when CUPW eventually won this goal on behalf of its members, the provision of paid maternity leave did spread across the public service (Luxton and Reiter 1997: 210). As Jacqueline Mondros and Scott Wilson indicate, long-term process goals are difficult to achieve and yet are particularly important because they can start to create meaningful social change (1994: 138). Securing paid maternity leave can be seen as one long-term process goal that, once achieved, constituted a major gain in the fight for women's social equality. Therefore, the results spread in part to how they desired long-term goals.

DYNAMICS OF CUPW 1981 STRIKE

CUPW's victory brought the movement for paid maternity benefits to such a point of success that the struggle was taken up by other unions, most significantly by the Canadian Union for Public Employees (CUPE) and the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC), which won the right in 1982 (White 1990: 155; Moyer 1987: 155–59). In addition, as a result of the alliance built between CUPW and women's groups, in 1985 the Canadian Labour Code extended this right to include 24 more weeks for leave to anyone caring for an infant. And, in 1990, modifications to the Unemployment Insurance Act allowed new parents an increase of 10 weeks on top of the initial 15 weeks (Mahon 1997: 402). Meg Luxton and Ester Reiter claim that half of all union members in different employment sectors had gained employer-based top ups of maternity benefits by 1992, meaning that 49.1 percent of all unionized female workers had additional maternity benefits (1997: 210). Thus, the concerns of the women's movement merged with those of the labour movement to produce a result whereby the lives of all working families were improved.

Labour union membership in Canada has declined greatly since 1980s; as of 2011, only 29.7 percent of all Canadian Workers are unionized (Uppal 2011). Under current neoliberal policies, workers continue to experience wage stagnation, job de-skilling, fewer full-time jobs, the deterioration of opportunities for job advancement, and increases in expected overtime hours (Scott-Marshall 2007: 22, 29). In 2007, 40 percent of women in Canada were employed in forms of non-standard, part-time or contract work compared to only 30 percent of men (Townson and Hayes 2007; see also Pupo and Duffy 2003; Chayowski and Powell 1999), and as a result they are often unable to access benefits like unemployment insurance and maternity leave. Since the majority of women are covered for maternity leave through Employment Insurance benefits or via union contracts, we could argue that women are experiencing a serious loss of rights overall.

In light of this, the story of the powerful alliance between the women's movement, CUPW and the labour movement in the early 1980s is more instructive now than ever. Clearly, we need to implement more labour market social policies to improve job security and provide basic rights for workers. The adoption of a "global package of social rights", which could include minimum income to a middle-class standard, guaranteed unemployment insurance and maternity leave, is one way to avoid income insecurity and the poverty trap, and would improve the current situation for most workers (Vermeylen 2008: 206-7). A global package of rights has been implemented in countries such as Denmark and the Netherlands, along with innovative labour market policies (Viebrock and Clasen 2009). In these countries, if individuals lose their jobs, they are protected by a variety of robust social security systems, can receive some income and are able to access retraining programs. The example of the CUPW/women's

movement alliance should also inspire us to work toward stronger alliances between workers and other marginalized social groups in order to restore workers' rights and improve social equality overall.

CONCLUSION

Social movements are constantly working to change dominant ideas about identities and cultural values through what has been called the "politics of signification" (Benford and Snow 2000: 613). The women's movement of the 1970s and early 1980s aimed to politicize large numbers of women to change social structures, including workplaces (Adamson *et al.* 1988: 81). But without the alliance with CUPW, it is likely that the women's movement would have had to wait far longer before securing paid maternity benefits, despite all the different tactics it employed. With the 1981 CUPW strike, women and men in trade unions formed an alliance with women's rights activists to bring about significant workplace change, which then spread to other sectors of society; this is how the rights and benefits that Canadian women have come to expect today were brought into being (Adamson *et al.* 1988: 79). The alliance with CUPW helped move the women's movement beyond a simple grassroots movement (Adamson *et al.* 1988: 79) into a strong political force within Canadian society, and the women's movement helped CUPW gain benefits for its members that would set a benchmark of achievement for other unions for decades to come. In sum, the power these two groups generated in alliance produced one of the most important social benefits we currently enjoy as Canadian citizens. Therefore, significant power rests in alliances, and further growth in the number and kinds of alliances can help further this movement towards equality.

NOTES

- ¹ The National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC) was a feminist organization that came together in 1971 to try to put pressure on the federal government to pass through the 167 recommendations of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women.
- ² As previously noted, CUPW was not the first union to attempt to gain this right. AUCE in B.C as well as the Quebec Common Front had already successfully won the right at a provincial level.
- ³ Intersectionality theory argues that in order to fully grasp the nature of social experience, we need to explore many different points of identity that comprise each individual and the different relationships and intersections between individuals; it works to explore "the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relationships and subject formations" (McCall 2005).

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