

1994

SASKATCHEWAN FEDERATION OF LABOUR
WOMEN'S POLICY STATEMENT

We come from every affiliate of the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour (SFL). We are older women, younger women, visible minority women, aboriginal women, lesbians, women with disabilities, women of all races and backgrounds struggling collectively for recognition of the worth of our work and a place within the labour movement.

Women have been regarded as passive members of labour and of the SFL. Very few of our brothers suspected that we were capable of sustaining militant action and very few women really felt themselves to be trade unionists. But if you look at some of the longest strikes in Saskatchewan in the past few years, Nipawin (RWDSU), Swift Current (SEIU), Pagette (CEP), Base Communication, women were front and centre. We have served notice, not just on the employer but also on the unions that we are not willing to passively accept low wages and subordinate status. Women are demanding fair wages and respect, recognition at work and within their unions. Bread and Roses.

Women's activism has become a force for the revitalization of the labour movement. We have challenged the vision, broadening it to include equity within the workplace, unions, and society, confronting racism, harassment, violence and discrimination, pay equity and social issues such as reproductive choice, child care and the differences in political and economic power which underlie our inequality.

In broadening the focus to include equity and social justice, women's activism has opened up space in the labour movement agenda for the inclusion of different experiences and sources of identity. Together we have struggled to build a new solidarity which recognizes and respects these differences so that those of us who remain marginalized at work, in society and in the labour movement may take our rightful place in the mainstream.

Our efforts within the SFL, and within the affiliates have helped to develop the labour's commitment to the fight for equality at the workplace in our unions and in the community. Harassment is on the agenda because we put it there. Violence against women and workers has become increasingly important in our fight for change in society, at the workplace and in the home.

More can be done but women are justly proud of the efforts we have made over the past decade and a half to transform the labour movement and make it more responsive to its membership. In so doing we have built a stronger more democratic SFL which is more able to represent the rights of women workers. Yet there continues to be resistance to change women's inequality in the labour movement, at the workplace and in society. We call on our SFL and its affiliates to bring down their internal barriers of resistance and prejudice so that instead of being an obstacle in the struggle of working women for equality and justice, they are rather a source of strength and empowerment, of inspiration and hope. A labour movement based on the foundation of equality and respect for diversity is stronger and more dynamic.

The equality we fight for should go beyond half measures or already accomplished initiatives. To create an inclusive solidarity, the labour movement has to deepen its commitment to equity by developing new ways of doing things that help to transform the unequal distribution of power. We must ensure that we develop a genuine solidarity that brings those at the margins into the mainstream. To do that we must:

Unite to confront violence against women.

Work to reduce the high cost of being a woman.

Transform the systems of power in the workplace, labour movement and society

Build equity within the labour movement and society.

Educate and train for activism in the labour movement and in the community.

Renew our sisterhood.

In order to accomplish these objectives the following action program is proposed:

AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

Affirmative action can be generally defined as any action designed to overcome barriers to equality and to compensate for past and present discrimination, and to improve the economic status of equity groups. Affirmative action programs are the means by which we overcome the barriers to women's equality and ensure the goal of equal opportunity will be reached.

Our vital social programs are threatened by federal spending limitations, provincial priorities and overall opting-out. Unchallenged, the continuing economic crisis will further entrench the unequal status of women in society. Women refuse to be the scapegoats of this crisis.

The labour movement has traditionally advocated for a Canada which promotes women's and equity groups rights, and provides the federal government with the authority to initiate National Affirmative Action Programs.

The Saskatchewan Federation of Labour endorses and supports any and all forms of affirmative action policies and procedures which will recognize the equality of women.

We must also look within the union movement, we have made demands on our employers, we must be prepared to make demands on our unions.

Women are joining the union movement in growing numbers, but are still very much under-represented amongst the leadership and on unions' staff. For unions to have credibility when advocating affirmative action, the status of union women members within our own union structure must demonstrate our commitment to equality. Concrete evidence of such commitment must exist in the form of a strong presence of women, in union activities and in positions of leadership.

The SFL urges its affiliates to facilitate greater participation of women in decision making capacities and within all avenues of affiliates activities.

PAY EQUITY

The Saskatchewan Federation of Labour has recognized the importance of equal pay for work of equal value. The affiliates have reaffirmed pay equity as a priority at the last four SFL conventions.

We are aware that introducing specific pay equity legislation to address the wage gap will involve added cost for the government and employers. However, there is already a price tag attached to the wage gap. This is the cost of lost earnings and it affects many women in this

province. In many cases these workers and their dependents are the very members of our society who can least afford a "discrimination subsidy". Systemic gender based wage discrimination is unacceptable in any form to the women of this Federation.

The SFL believes the provincial government of Saskatchewan should enact comprehensive legislation that will cover all workers in Saskatchewan, unionized and non-unionized, in the public and the private sectors. The express purposes of such legislation would be to ensure the economic equality of women.

For legislation to effectively identify and correct wage differences based on gender, it must be proactive, mandatory, monitored, enforced, communicated and allow for class action and individual complaints.

The SFL urges all union and community groups to redouble their efforts to build a strong effective coalition and to mobilize the community and its affiliates to actively lobby the government for equal pay legislation.

The SFL continues to support the policy on minimum wage which should be set at 75% of the average industrial wage in Sask.

CONFRONTING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

The SFL defines violence against women as any act of gender based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, and economic threats whether occurring in public or in private life.

Many factors influence how and when women are victimized by violence, but the root cause is women's inequality, it supports gender based discrimination in our society, our homes, our workplaces, our unions, our courts and in our institutions.

The SFL encourages its affiliates to take action in working to end violence against women by:

Giving financial and political support to services for victims and survivors of violence, such as transition homes and shelters.

Educating our children to believe violence is an abuse of power and trust and does not resolve conflicts.

Challenging the tolerance of violence and sexism in movies, music videos, magazines, on television and radio and in advertisements.

Promoting awareness and educational sessions in the workplace, and in our unions on violence against women.

Challenging municipal, provincial and federal politicians to accept their responsibilities by increasing funding to programs that help women who are victims of violence; ensuring that judges, prosecutors and police officers receive appropriate training on sexism and violence; ensuring that our municipalities implement effective urban safety programs.

Participating in such activities as "Take Back the Night" and December 6th Commemoration.

Continuing to urge the federal and provincial governments to recognize the need for educational programs, proper funding and counselling in the struggle to end violence against women.

The SFL encourages its affiliates to take further action by:

Developing resource material that will enable locals to access their workplace to reduce the risk of violence.

Bargaining for the right to refuse work if a member is being harassed; the right of members to receive counselling of their choice, paid by their employer; the right to special leave to recuperate from incidents of violence and the right to attend appointments with lawyers and/or police.

Providing forums where union members can be sensitized to the devastation impact of violence and where they can develop effective strategies against violence.

REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

Fundamental to women's equality is the right to control our own bodies. As women we continue to struggle to make our own choices concerning reproduction.

Reproductive technology is also taking control out of our hands and perhaps eventually out of our bodies, placing it in the hands of doctors and scientists. This is being done through in vitro fertilization (I.V.F.). The failure rate of I.V.F. is 85%, the process often needs to be done several times in order to carry a fetus to term. Also I.V.F. is restricted to those who can pay.

The SFL and its affiliates must continue to exert pressure through government legislation and collective agreements so that women are provided a healthy and safe working environment during pregnancy or breastfeeding. Women should not feel the need to leave their jobs when pregnant or breastfeeding. If the working conditions are not healthy and safe then we need to be re-assigned to other tasks. As women we have the right to a healthy baby and a career.

The SFL should continue to support reproductive health services in the provincial health plan and work towards increasing the accessibility of reproductive services in Saskatchewan.

The SFL and its affiliates will work for the accessibility of RU486 as a safe and effective method of the termination of pregnancy, during the first trimester of a pregnancy.

The SFL and its affiliates must continue to recognize and promote women's right to choose accessible and safe termination of pregnancy.

The SFL and its affiliates will participate and assist community-based organizations that assist women and their families deal with breast cancer.

The SFL and its affiliates will continue to pressure government and the medical profession to enhance research programs and to ensure breast cancer is made a health priority.

CHILD CARE AND FAMILY CARE

The number women and children living in poverty in Canada is increasing. In 98% of relationship breakdowns, women are awarded custody of the children. 66% of women who receive child support payments are forced to live below the poverty line.

One of the activities being undertaken to assist in this concern is the lobbying of the legislative assembly to provide an infrastructure for coordinating and initiating supports to families so parents can provide for their children. Also we must continue to pressure the Saskatchewan legislative assembly to initiate an "Action plan to eliminate child poverty in Saskatchewan by the Year 2000".

This is a beginning, however it is not nearly enough.

For more than a decade the SFL and the CLC have demanded that publicly funded, non-profit, high quality child care be recognized as a basic social service, available to all parents who chose to use it.

The small number of licensed spaces now available are only accessible to families that can afford to pay high user-fees and to low income families that can satisfy the eligibility criteria for government subsidy. The vast majority of Canadian families must rely on unlicensed informal child care arrangements.

In addition to the high costs and lack of spaces, the existing licensed day care system does not address the necessity of child care services for children of parents who work other than 9 to 5 shifts. The needs of rural families, aboriginal parents and children with disability receive little or no attention and there is no consideration given to children's language requirements.

Most child care workers, the majority of them women, are paid wages well below the average industrial wage and are denied the job security, benefits, career development opportunities and the respect they deserve.

It is now understood that solving the current child care crises is an essential component in achieving women's equality. Moreover, a comprehensive system of high quality, affordable, and accessible child care is urgently needed to meet the needs of our children.

Another issue involving the welfare of our children and families is the tax laws a number of which hurt rather than help the need for better care.

The current child support tax regulations require that the persons who receive the payments must declare them as taxable income while the person paying the support is entitled to tax deductions.

The custodial parents, the majority being mothers, are required to claim child support payments as income which increases their taxable income, causing the loss of some or all of the non-taxable benefits such as child tax benefit and the GST rebates.

Uniformity between the provinces is needed when enforcing child support orders. There is also a need to change the Income Tax Act so that it allows exemptions from taxation for both the persons paying the support and the person receiving the payments.

Substantial increases in funding are required in order to bring social assistance payments to reasonable levels. Increasing these payments is necessary to bring people up to at least Statistics Canada's poverty line.

All forms of a compulsory workfare or job training should be abolished. They should be replaced by programs set up to develop the job skills and life skills of those who are able to work and to enrich the lives of those who are not able to work.

We must make the family more of a priority within our collective agreements. The recognition of family responsibilities and family life must be extended throughout the workplace and society. In conjunction with the CLC and other unions, we must reopen public discussion of the need for reduced work hours without loss of salary. The campaign for a shorter work week must be revived. We must include in our bargaining proposals the need for a shorter work week and for flexible and compressed schedules.

We must endeavour to bring a better, brighter future to our children and our families, with the following as priorities:

The SFL should support the Saskatchewan Campaign 2000 Committee in their effort surrounding child and family care.

The SFL must encourage its affiliates to continue their work of organizing child care workers, to bring about decent wages, benefits and conditions for these workers.

Child care has reached a major crisis point and all of us must lobby the government to implement a national child care program which recognizes the need of child care workers, working parents and most of all the children.

The SFL and its affiliates should continue to support the efforts of such organizations as Divorce 2000 to make the badly needed changes to the Income Tax Laws.

Affiliates of the SFL must be urged to make paid leave for workers with family responsibilities a priority in collective bargaining.

The SFL should support sizable increase in the benefits under the social assistance program.

The SFL and its affiliates should initiate a child and family support program which assists members while attending union sponsored activities, such as training courses, meetings, conferences and conventions.

EDUCATION, TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT

The 1991 Saskatchewan Federation of Labour convention adopted the Economic Agenda for Saskatchewan Labour in the 90's. This document calls for improved access to training and re-training for all who wish to enhance their occupational and life skills.

It is important that attention be drawn to the specific training needs of women. Women tend to be poorer, to have more family responsibilities, to have less confidence, to have been exposed to a narrower range of skills and options, to experience larger gaps in their employment history, and to experience harassment, discrimination and abuse in their workplace, community and home.

Training programs in the workplace, in institutions and in unions, should be flexible enough to permit women to keep their family obligations and to accommodate those with disabilities. Training courses and programs should offer sufficient support to the participants to overcome any barriers to learning.

Women who are being trained for traditionally male occupations need counselling, support and work experience in order to demonstrate their competence. Occupational skills are not enough to overcome job discrimination.

It is therefore recommended that:

1. The SFL and its affiliates pressure government and employers to provide retraining or relocation assistance for workers unemployed due to technological change.
2. The SFL and its affiliates participate at as many levels as possible, in the design and delivery of training in Saskatchewan.
3. The SFL and its affiliates participate in research on the impact of economic restructuring on women workers with specific reference to female dominated occupations.
4. The SFL should continue to urge government to repeal unfair eligibility requirements of unemployment insurance.
5. Affiliates should continue to bargain for paid education leave provisions for members to achieve high school graduation or other certification courses critical to adapting labour market changes.
6. The SFL and its affiliates should lobby and pressure the government to require accreditation programs in both private and public sector institutions to undertake proactive recruitment and accommodation of women and students from the equity groups. The recruitment of instructors should also be done in accordance with an equity plan.
7. The SFL and its affiliates should lobby government calling for all accreditation courses to contain objectives, and training techniques that support the learning needs of women participants.
8. The SFL and its affiliates should consider gender equity in the appointment of labour representatives to all training boards.

RENEW OUR SISTERHOOD

In calling on the SFL and its affiliates to create more representative and democratic structures, we must be sure to provide support and encouragement from those we elect to represent us while at the same time we must demand accountability.

Women also have to give greater recognition to diversity. Needs and interests differ between areas and cultures. We have to be sensitive to the different attitudes and outlook of rural women and of immigrant women, as well as the different needs of women in the equity groups.

We have to build a more inclusive and representative solidarity. Those among us who enjoy privileges or advantages whether because of skin colour, ethnicity, age, education,

socioeconomic status, lack of disability, sexual orientation, language, area of residence, country of birth, family or marital status, have to recognize our privileges and advantages. We must always be sure to work cooperatively with those affected by prejudices, to eliminate the discrimination and gain equality for all.

In order to assume a leadership role the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour must become more inclusive by finding the human and financial resources to continue its work in this area. The SFL must pressure the provincial government to introduce legislation aimed at improving the representation of women and other disadvantaged minority groups in all political institutions. We must pressure the government to expand the role of the Women's Secretariat giving it a higher profile and a more pro-active voice for women. These changes are more likely to happen if they have the strong support of all levels of our labour movement, namely the SFL, the affiliates and the locals.

The Saskatchewan Federation of Labour women must continue the activism that started the women's movement within Saskatchewan. We have to renew our commitment, get involved, push our unions and our governments to recognize that our issues must be the mainstream issues. We have to continue our fight for equality in the workplace, in our unions and in our communities. Women must play a crucial role in every aspect of the labour movement and society.

*Adopted in Convention
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Saskatchewan Federation of Labour, CLC*