

The Rose

100 Years of Struggle and We've Still Got Work to Do!

In 1910, Clara Zetkin, the feisty German orator and activist, gave a speech at the International Socialist Women's conference in Copenhagen. She proposed that "the socialist women of all nationalities will hold each year a Women's Day, whose foremost purpose it must be to aid the attainment of women's suffrage."

The first International Women's Day (IWD) was held in March 1911. Originally known as International Working Women's Day, the occasion celebrates women's rights and gives us an opportunity to act for change. People all over the world still voice their demands for a better world on March 8th every year.

As IWD became officially recognized and adopted by the United Nations in the 1970s, the "working" got dropped from its title and its roots in



"The working class will never sell out its birthright to social revolution"
- Clara Zetkin

working-class struggle were obscured. But on the 100th anniversary of IWD, CUPW remembers that it was first conceived as a day of action for working women everywhere.

It's easy to feel good about the history of women's accomplishments. But there is so much left to do. Most women gained the vote during the years following Zetkin's call for a day of action. Some of us now hold positions of power and successfully

campaign for social change. But today, in the 21st century, equality has yet to be achieved.

In this issue of *The Rose*, we remember that none of us are equal until all of us are equal. Until that day comes, we continue our struggle.

Happy International Women's Day to all our sisters and allies!

Women in the 1919 Winnipeg General Strike

On Thursday May 15, 1919, at 7:00 am, five hundred telephone operators walked off the job at the end of their shift in support of the Metal Trades Council's struggle for union recognition and free collective bargaining. The next shift stayed out too. This was the beginning of the Winnipeg General Strike, which saw 35,000 workers in the streets.

Although women don't get credit for starting the Winnipeg General Strike in most histories, 90% of the telephone operators who walked off the job were female. Women participated in all aspects of the struggle and many went to jail. It is important to commemorate the courageous actions of our sisters: too often history only reflects what the men were doing.

Winnipeg in 1919 was a city divided by the CPR tracks: working classes and immigrants to the north were miles apart in their quality of life from the middle classes to the south. Political influences, the return of soldiers from World War 1 to unemployment at home, the rising costs of living, exploitative immigration, class polarization and the growth of trade unionism all contributed to the General Strike. It was driven by the desperate state of the workers of the day.

In 1919, women were employed as factory workers, retail clerks, cleaners, waitresses, laundry workers, nurses, office clerks or teachers. Few made a living wage. It was assumed that every woman had a father or a husband to support her. The reality was different. Many men had died or deserted wives during the war, and women struggled to raise and feed their families.

The Women's Labor League was developed to provide 1,500 free meals per day at the height of the strike. The YWCA provided emergency accommodation. Women stockpiled food in preparation, cooking, baking, and storing water. In addition to these supportive roles, women also engaged in organizing and direct action. Proclamations were issued, warning women to take part in demonstrations at their own peril. But women participated in most activities. In contrast to the subservient passive role women in 1919 were expected to take, they rioted, assaulted scabs, wrecked scab delivery trucks and their goods, and harassed scab workers and union-busting security police. One woman is even credited with setting fire to the streetcar on "Bloody Saturday."



Helen Armstrong, dubbed "The Wild Woman of the West" by the media, was president of the Women's Labor League. She encouraged women to join the strike.

Pensions provide a secure retirement income. Because many women have children and work part-time, they are at a disadvantage. At Canada Post, more women than men work part-time. This is a reality that CUPW addressed in 2003 when we successfully bargained to have the pension for part-timers based on hours worked, instead of scheduled hours. In 2003, RSMCs also gained access to the Canada Post pension plan as a result of CUPW's decade-long battle for employee status for RSMCs.

W O M E N and PENSIONS



We cannot afford to lose these gains in the current round of negotiations.

CUPW members currently have a **defined benefit** pension plan. Under this type of plan, our retirement income is stable and predictable. It is based on our earnings and guaranteed by the employer. Defined benefits plans do not punish women for having children because you can factor parental leaves into the number of years contributed and take into account your highest-paid years worked.

Canada Post wants to replace this plan with a **defined contribution** pension plan for new hires. This is essentially a group RRSP, subject to the stock market. Members of the plan bear the risk, while the employer bears none and has no obligation to ensure that the plan stays funded. Like gambling, a few will do well out of it, while most won't. Defined contribution pension plans make retirement even less secure and women just can't afford that.

The Canadian Labour Congress is calling for a gradual doubling of Canada and Quebec Pension Plan benefits as the best way to provide retirement security for all. Their proposal would raise the basic pension floor for all workers from the current level of \$11,200 a year to a far more livable \$22,400.

The Canada Post pension plan and women: a history

1924

Civil Service Superannuation Plan. Although men and women contributed to the plan, the survivor benefit was only for widows and children of male plan members.

1954

Public Service Superannuation Act enacted. Women had lower contributions because their families were not entitled to survivor benefits.

1976

Survivor benefits for women introduced. Contribution rate for male and female workers equalized.

1989

Amendments made so those receiving survivor benefits would continue to get them even if they remarried.

1992

Legislation enacted regarding the division of pension on marriage breakdown.

1999

Same-sex survivor benefits introduced.

2000

On October 1, 2000, workers at Canada Post covered by the Canada Post Pension Plan, including workers previously covered by the Superannuation plan.

2003

CUPW negotiates to have part-time extended hours included as pensionable service, affecting mostly women. Previously, only scheduled hours were pensionable. CUPW also negotiates pension coverage for temporary workers with a single assignment of six months or more.

2004

RSMCs covered by the pension plan. Since RSMCs are primarily women, this gave a lot more women a pension plan.

2011

Canada Post attempts to wipe out these gains by proposing a defined contribution pension plan for all new hires as part of Urban Operations bargaining...

A struggling sister still needs your help!

Marie-Hélène Dubé hasn't given up since we last wrote about her in *The Rose* in December 2009. She is still fighting to improve the sickness benefit provisions of the *Employment Insurance Act* by increasing the number of weeks of coverage.

DID YOU KNOW THAT:

- If you have cancer or another serious disease, you're entitled to only 15 weeks of employment insurance sickness benefits?
- To be eligible for such benefits, you must have worked 600 hours during the previous 52 weeks?
- These benefits are taxable, lower than regular EI benefits and haven't been indexed to inflation since 1971?



Here's what Marie-Hélène has accomplished since 2009:

April 13, 2010: Filed 62,766 signatures with Bloc Québécois MP Yves Lessard;

June 2010: Bloc Québécois introduced Bill C-525 to increase the number of weeks of sickness benefits from 15 to 50;

June 2010: NDP introduced Bill C-526 to increase the number of weeks of sickness benefits from 15 to 52;

June 29, 2010: Filed 237,303 new signatures with Senator Claude Carignan.

So far, Marie-Hélène has filed more than 300,000 signatures and she's not done! She hopes to reach 500,000 signatures as quickly as possible. Support is building from all sides. Unions are joining Marie-Hélène because her cause is our cause. At the last QFL Convention, held from November 29 to December 3, 2010, many unions submitted resolutions to amend Section 12(3c) of the *Employment Insurance Act* and support Marie-Hélène's petition.

Act now! Help Marie-Hélène in her fight.

Ask your MP to support Bills C-525 and C-526 to improve employment insurance benefits.

Sign the petition at: <http://petitionassuranceemploi.com>

BARGAINING FOR EQUALITY

RSMCs

Over 66% of RSMCs are women

The average annual wage for RSMCs (including vehicle allowance) is \$34,538.61: the average annual national wage, according to Statistics Canada, is \$44,893.00

RSMCs don't have paid sick leave, extended health care coverage or a drug plan

Although their routes are growing, RSMCs don't have full job security

Urban Operations

Women make up a sizeable percentage of temporary workers. Canada Post's two-tier wage proposals drastically affect women, even if and when they get full-time jobs.

Our demand that all workers receive anti-harassment training is an equality issue.

Improved staffing is an important way to alleviate stress from balancing work and family life.

**We all deserve equality.
Let's make it happen.**