

A BRIEF HISTORY OF
THE SERVICE, OFFICE and RETAIL WORKERS UNION of CANADA:
A UNION FOR WORKING WOMEN

The Service, Office and Retail Workers Union of Canada is an independent union formed by working women to organize those occupations which have been ignored by the traditional trade unions. It grew out of the Working Women's Association, which in 1971 began doing support actions for working women's struggles and public educationals regarding equal pay, day care, job security and other concerns of working women.

Following a series of seminars in 1972 about "how to form a union," the Working Women's Association did just that. In October of 1972, a Founding Convention of 24 women approved the constitution of the new union.

The purpose of the new union was to organize workers in retail stores, offices, banks, restaurants and other places which employ mostly women. Since only 34% of working women in B.C. belong to unions, it was felt that an independent union run by women workers themselves was necessary. The constitution was designed to make the union as democratic as possible, and prevent the establishment of a professional leadership isolated from the membership. All officers are elected, and no one can hold a paid full-time position with the union for more than three years without going back to work at a regular job.

SORWUC and the Working Women's Association continued to do support actions, such as assisting the Wardair strikers and organizing a boycott campaign in support of the striking workers at Denny's Restaurant (Vancouver, 1973).

SORWUC's first certification application was approved in July, 1973, when the B.C. Labour Relations Board ruled SORWUC was indeed a "trade union in the meaning of the Act" and could bargain on behalf of employees in a small legal office. This remained SORWUC's only bargaining unit for another year.

In the meantime, SORWUC members supported (and some participated in) the organizing drive by the Association of University & College Employees (AUCE) at the University of B.C. This union was organized by UBC's clerical and library workers themselves, 90% of whom are women. The drive was carried out successfully without any outside financial assistance. It proved that not only should working women organize themselves, they could organize themselves!

In 1974 and 1975, SORWUC was certified to represent a number of social service agencies and day care centres, as well as several small offices. There were 15 bargaining units with about 150 members in Local 1 of SORWUC. 1976 saw the addition of more bargaining units, and at the time of writing (October 1977) Local 1 has about 200 members. Some of these units have raised perplexing problems in that the immediate "employer" has no control over money: funds are provided through government grants or subsidies. Thus, negotiating a wage increase with the "employer" is only half the battle, as this must be followed by asking the government for additional funds. The government, by hiding behind so-called independent boards, is refusing to assume any responsibility for the financial welfare of employees who are paid by grants that it, the government, hands out.

Day care centres are a case in point. The employees of the day care centres which are units of Local 1 are working with their "employers" (usually non-profit societies composed of parents) on how best to achieve quality day care, which includes decent wages for the employees. Some day

care workers make as little as \$500 a month take home pay, and have not had a pay increase for over two years. Still, because there is a limit on the amount of subsidy that the provincial government will give a parent for day care costs, and because there is a limit on the amount that parents, especially single parents, can deduct for day care expenses on their income tax returns, the day care workers are forced either to demand wages from the pockets of parents (who are mainly single working women) or go without adequate wages until the government changes its policies.

The contracts which some of the units in SORWUC Local 1 have negotiated include a few unusual clauses which are of great importance to women workers, for example:

- * Full pay for maternity leave
- * Two weeks paternity leave with pay
- * A shorter work week (32 hours in a law office; 33 hours in a credit union; and 34 hours in a social service agency)
- * Extra time at lunch once a month, with no loss of pay, for a union meeting - this enables people with home responsibilities to attend the meetings and participate in the union, thus maintaining union democracy
- * Personal rights clauses which provide that the boss cannot regulate employees' dress, and cannot ask employees to perform personal services such as bringing coffee, typing personal letters, taking things to the drycleaners, etc.

These contracts also contain provisions which are generally found in all union contracts: job security, a grievance procedure, promotions according to seniority as well as ability, and of course, better wages.

SORWUC's constitution allows the union to organize workers all over Canada. The foregoing description refers to Local 1. During the summer of 1976, SORWUC was approached by bank workers who wanted to unionize. Within two months, the majority of employees in 11 bank branches in B.C. had joined the union, and it was decided to charter a separate local for bank workers called United Bank Workers, SORWUC Local 2. On September 26, 1976, Local 2 was granted a Charter, the by-laws were drawn up and passed, and an executive was elected, all employees in banks. Organizing could now begin in earnest.

After SORWUC had submitted applications to represent employees in 20 bank branches and a data centre to the Canada Labour Relations Board (CLRB), the Board set a date for a hearing into the matter of what would constitute an appropriate unit for collective bargaining in the banks. This was the first major organizing drive in the major banks of Canada and no precedent had been set. During April 1977, the United Bank Workers and their lawyers met with the Bank of Commerce and its lawyers and the Canada Labour Relations Board to decide this question. The Bank wanted a ruling which would require every bank employee in Canada to join a union - in other words, that the nation was the appropriate bargaining unit. The union argued that many decisions are made at a branch level and so the branch should be considered the bargaining unit.

Finally, on June 14, 1977, the CLRB made its decision. Ruling in favour of the union's position, that a bank branch was an appropriate bargaining unit, the Board stated:

"The express intention of Parliament is 'the encouragement of free co-lective bargaining' . . . Too large units in unorganized industries will abort any possibility of collective bargaining

ever commencing and defeat the express intention of Parliament . . . We have decided that the single branch location of the Commerce encompasses employees with a community of interest and is an appropriate bargaining unit. . . The counter arguments of the employer are in large measure hypothetical fears that we find should not prevail over the tangible realities of the Union's position."

The Union won its point, and for the first time Canadian bank workers have a chance to bargain collectively for wages and working conditions.

Since the Board's decision, the bank workers' organization has been growing quickly. In August, 1977, Local 2 was dissolved as the organizing drive had become province-wide and the local structure was undemocratic - bank workers out of Vancouver could not attend meetings. The United Bank Workers Section of SORWUC was chartered, with jurisdiction over bank workers in British Columbia, and the intention is that organizing committees all over the province will grow into locals within the UBW Section. At the time of writing, 14 certifications for bank branches have been granted, and ten are pending. Organizing has spread to Saskatchewan, with organizing committees active in Saskatoon and Regina - two of the pending applications are for branches in that province. Although we have had some setbacks - votes were lost in 14 branches, largely due to the long delay between our applications for certification and the Board's decision - we plan to begin negotiations with the banks in November, 1977. Bank workers from all over B.C. have been meeting to discuss contract proposals, to be voted on by the entire membership in referendum. These include a base rate of \$1,140 a month, 4 weeks vacation in the first year of employment, a standard work week of 35 hours, voluntary overtime to be paid at double time, promotions on the basis of seniority and ability, and pro-rated benefits for part-time employees. The wage proposal was arrived at by calculating what a single mother with one child would need to earn in order to support herself and her family. We hope to have twenty certifications when we begin negotiations with the banks - but in order to have the power to bargain a really good contract, we will have to keep organizing.

Local 1, meanwhile, has been organizing in industries other than the banks. We have just applied for our second neighbourhood pub, and contacts have been made in retail stores and restaurants. Leafletting of offices in the downtown Vancouver area continues, and it is expected that the publicity resulting from the bank drive will encourage women in other industries to join SORWUC - and improve their wages and working conditions.

SERVICE, OFFICE and RETAIL WORKERS UNION of CANADA
Suite 1114, 207 West Hastings Street
Vancouver, B.C. V6B 1K2
681-2811 684 2834

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