

The Service Office and Retail Workers' Union of Canada - a brief history

The Service, Office and Retail Workers' Union of Canada is an independent union formed by working women committed to organising those occupations which have been ignored by the traditional trade unions. SORWUC grew out of the Working Women's Association (WWA) which in 1971 began doing support work for working women's struggles and public education regarding equal pay, day care, job security and other concerns of working women. WWA members participated in union drives at Denny's and Smitty's restaurants and in the formation of the Association of University and College Employees.

SORWUC was formed in October 1972 and continued to do support actions such as assisting the Wardair strikers and organising a boycott campaign in support of striking workers at Denny's restaurant on Broadway. SORWUC members also supported (and some participated in) the organising drive by AUCE at the University of B.C. This union was organised by UBC clerical and library workers, 90% of whom are women. The drive was carried out successfully without any outside financial assistance and resulted in one of the best union contracts for clerical and library workers in Canada. It proved that not only should working women organise themselves, they could organise themselves.

SORWUC was formed to organise workers in retail stores, offices, banks and restaurants and other places which employ mostly women. The constitution is designed to make SORWUC as democratic as possible and to prevent the establishment of a professional bureaucracy. All officers are elected by referendum ballot and there is a restriction on the number of years people can hold full-time office in the union. The National Constitution allows a maximum of three years in office though the locals and the sections can decide their own limits within that maximum. (Local 1 has a 1 year limit; the United Bank Workers Section has a 2 year limit.) The union also makes a practice of voting on all important decisions by referendum ballot mailed to each member's home. Another important aspect of SORWUC's constitution is autonomy of locals and bargaining units. Locals of the union maintain complete control of their own financial and other affairs, and have the right to secede upon a majority vote of their membership. The members in each bargaining unit are responsible for writing and negotiating their own contracts, as well as retaining all control over negotiations and strategy such as strikes.

SORWUC's constitution allows us to organise workers anywhere in Canada, although we exist mostly in B.C. The National Executive has the authority to charter autonomous locals and sections of SORWUC and also initiates new organising. SORWUC presently consists of Local 1 in B.C., Local 3 (Oxfam employees, with members across Canada), and the United Bank Workers Section.

Local 1

SORWUC's first certification was granted by the B.C. Labour Relations Board in July 1973. This small legal office remained our only bargaining unit for another year. Their collective agreement now provides for wages of \$11.00 per hour for legal secretaries.

Local 1 now has 14 active certified bargaining units: 5 day-care centres, 5 offices, 3 restaurants/bars, and 2 social service units. We have approximately 200 members. Members-at-large, people who wish to support the union, and/or hope to be able to organise their workplaces one day, are a significant part of Local 1's membership.

The dues in Local 1 are \$6.00 a month for members working full time under a collective agreement; \$4.00 per month for part time employees, (14-24 hour work week), and, \$1.00 per month (less than a 14 hour work-week), and, \$3.00 per month for members without a contract.

The restaurant industry continues to be a difficult one in which to win and keep a union contract. The employees at the Muckamuck restaurant have been on strike since June 1st, 1978 (21 months). The employees are committed to stand together until they are all back to work under a signed collective agreement. SORWUC members and supporters have rallied to keep the picket line and the strike fund going for those 21 months. In excess of \$32,000 in strike pay has been raised so far; strikers are paid \$100.00 per week. The determination of the Muckamuck strikers is an inspiration to restaurant workers and a warning to employers that we are prepared to fight for our legal right to organise. At this time, the employers at the Muckamuck continue to refuse to negotiate; SORWUC has filed an unfair labour practice charge with the restaurant employer - citing their refusal to negotiate. The Labour Relations Board will make a decision on whether or not to hold a hearing.

Workers at the Tudor Inn in Kitimat joined SORWUC in December 1978. After much stalling by the owners in negotiations, a government-supervised strike vote was held in August 1979 and 93% voted for strike action. Within a week, we had a union contract and a wage increase from the minimum wage to \$5.50 per hour.

Forty Powell River Homemakers joined SORWUC and signed their first contract in May 1978. These workers, being 'domestic workers', are not covered by the B.C. labour legislation protecting most workers and so their contract is particularly important to them.

United Bank Workers Section

In the summer of 1976, SORWUC was approached by bank workers who wanted to organise. Over the next two years, our members in the banks built organisations in B.C. and Saskatchewan and established the legal right to organise in the banks. The campaign was run by the United Bank Workers as an autonomous part of SORWUC consisting of members in banks.

SORWUC was successful in winning certifications for 24 bank branches in B.C. and 2 in Saskatchewan. Contract proposals including a base rate of \$1140 per month, 4 weeks vacation in the first year of employment, a standard 35-hour work-week, voluntary overtime to be paid at double time, promotions based on the basis of seniority and ability, and pro-rated benefits for part-time employees were some of the adopted contract demands. The wage base proposal was arrived at by calculating the minimum required for a single parent to support her-himself and one child, taking into account such expenses as food, shelter, clothing, medical/dental, bus fares, etc.

After eight months of futile meetings with the banks, the UBW section in B.C. decided to stop negotiations. Our union was unable to raise the money needed to continue and the lack of support from the Canadian Labour Congress was a severe disappointment. However, had there been several thousand bank workers actively involved and paying union dues, we would not have had to rely so heavily on other unions. The banks were able to convince bank employees to 'wait and see' what the union could get, knowing that the union could not be successful as a small minority of bank employees. Twenty-four bank branches in B.C. could not do it alone.

The Saskatchewan UBW an autonomous section of SORWUC, continued to

negotiate and went through all the steps of the government conciliation process. The government appointed commissioner finally recommended a contract providing no wage increase. They were not strong enough to strike, and were not prepared to sign a bad contract. In February of 1979, they too stopped negotiating.

Although the UBW was not able to win collective agreements this time, we made gains towards our goal of a union in the banking industry. The legal right of bank workers to organise was established by SORWUC. There are bank workers all over B.C. who have experience in organising, negotiating, mediation and fighting unfair labour practices. The UBW is not giving up. We are continuing to leaflet banks, talk with bank and credit union employees and to build our organisation.

Local 3

In May of 1979, Oxfam employees signed their first contract. Divided into three regions and five workplaces, the 18 employees in SORWUC Local 3, took two years to reach this point. Oxfam employees were attracted to SORWUC's democratic constitution and their own contract reflects SORWUC's helpful influence and assistance.

Some of the Clauses in the SORWUC Contracts:

- a shorter work-week: 32 hours in a law office; 33 hours in a credit union.
- Personal rights clauses which provide that the employer cannot regulate employees' dress and cannot ask employees to perform personal services such as bringing coffee, typing personal letters, taking clothes to the dry cleaners, shopping, etc.
- full pay for maternity leave
- two weeks paternity leave with pay.
- extra time at lunch once a month, with no loss of pay, to attend union meetings. This enables people with home responsibilities to attend the meetings and participate in the union, thus maintaining union democracy.

Such clauses recognise the problems women face in their double role, not only as employees, but also as houseworkers and mothers. The clauses illustrate some of the ways union contracts can and should meet a woman's needs.

These contracts also contain provisions which are generally found in all union contracts: job security, a grievance procedure, promotions according to seniority, experience, and ability and of course, better wages. Women on the average earn only 57% of that earned by men; to change this, we will need organisation and determination. SORWUC members at the Electrical Trades Credit Union still earn much less than the average industrial wage in B.C., but their rate of \$1,088.00 per month for a 33-hour work-week represents a major improvement over the wages paid in unorganised banks and credit unions.

AUCE and SORWUC

As stated earlier, AUCE and SORWUC share some strong history. AUCE and SORWUC joining together would be a merger not an affiliation. We welcome AUCE joining with us in the struggle to organise the thousands of unorganised workers in the private sector in particular. We would see a joint convention of our two unions to discuss any problems of merger - our constitutions, dues structures, elections of executives etc

The SORWUC constitution provides for sections as well as for locals. A section in SORWUC is an occupational, provincial group. For example, the United Banks Workers Section in SORWUC is made up of just bank and credit union workers in B.C. Within that section there would be locals throughout the province - a structure exactly like the AUCE Provincial union.

Sections have the right to elect their own full-time people and are completely autonomous with their own by-laws, etc. We would welcome AUCE as the University and College Employees (B.C.) Section of SORWUC.

J. Ainsworth

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