9 WOMEN, LABOUR, AND THE LABOUR MOVEMENT

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Victoria Belcourt Callihoo, a Métis woman from northern Alberta born in 1861, was only thirteen years old when she first joined the buffalo hunt. Her mother “was a medicine woman who set broken bones and knew how to use medicinal herbs.” After the men killed the buffalo, she recalled, “the women would go out to help bring in the meat, and then the slicing of the meat began. We girls would then keep a little smoke going all day to keep flies away from the meat. The meat would be hung on rails that rested on two tripods at each end.”

Callihoo’s story demonstrates the varied work roles that women have played throughout Alberta’s history. As we saw in chapter 1, for most of the province’s history — that is, before Europeans arrived — women played crucial roles both in the home and as providers of food. The Native women who married European fur traders continued to play their traditional roles, as chapter 2 explains. But the arrival of European women in what is now Alberta introduced a gendered division of labour in which women were gradually mainly confined to domestic roles without pay while men were involved in paid labour. This chapter traces women’s gradual incorporation into the paid labour force and the ways in which that entry into paid labour was fraught with gendered identities that limited women’s pay and possibilities of advancement. The chapter also follows women’s involvement with the trade union movement in their efforts to improve their position within the labour force, and the positive and negative experiences that such involvement entailed.

WOMEN’S WORK, PAID AND UNPAID

As colonialism descended upon Alberta, the extended-family units of production that had characterized the millennia of pre-contact Native hunting and gathering history in the province gave way to European nuclear-family farming units of production. The division of labour was based on gender, but women’s roles on farms were varied. Women tended to and provided education for their children. They were responsible for
Working People in Alberta

The first nurses in Alberta were Grey Nuns, who did missionary as well as nursing work among Aboriginal populations. They built a hospital-school-orphanage in St. Albert in 1870. Alberta’s first lay nurse was probably Mary Newton, who arrived in Hermitage, near Edmonton, from London, England, in 1886. She worked in a “small log hospital” there and advertised “that she would do nursing and midwifery in private homes for ten dollars a week.”

The first regularly equipped hospital in what was to become Alberta opened in January 1890 in Medicine Hat, which also became the site of Alberta’s School of Nursing in 1894. Medicine Hat had the only hospital between Winnipeg and Vancouver at the time. It employed two nurses: Grace Reynolds, who had received her nurse training in Leeds, England, and held the position of matron until she married the hospital’s superintendent, and Mary Ellen Birtles, a nursing graduate from Winnipeg General Hospital. Apart from the doctor, they were the only staff in the twenty-four-bed hospital, and the only time off that either woman received was to allow them to attend church on Sunday. In her memoirs, written in 1939, Birtles described the two nurses’ responsibilities, which were in no way limited to nursing:

Miss Reynolds and I managed the work between us. She prepared the meals and looked after the downstairs work; I attended to the furnace and did the upstairs work, dusting etc. besides attending to the patients. When any surgical work had to be done we had to arrange the work accordingly. Miss Reynolds gave

MRS. OSBORNE BROWN

Using colourful pamphlets to promote settlement on the Prairies to British women, the CPR minimized the harshness of the land and the modest commercial incomes of its farmers. But these early-twentieth-century pamphlets included testimonies from prairie farm women that nonetheless provide some indication of the commercial pursuits of farm women. Mrs. Osborne Brown of Wales (it was an indication of women’s subordination that they generally referred to themselves publicly using their husband’s first name rather than their own) described her experiences as follows:

We had a garden and I bought a pair of chickens and a young pig. This was our “stock.” The garden behaved well; my vegetables from the first proved very remunerative, and eggs and chickens were in great demand. We set out the wild fruit trees, and in a few seasons we had lots of fruit to add to our market sales. By this time we had purchased several cows and my butter-making proved the biggest returns in a cash way. In winter, when you’d suppose a farm couldn’t yield any cash returns, the long evenings gave my embroidery needle a chance to assist, and I sold a great deal of this kind of work.

SOURCE: Canadian Pacific Railway, Women’s Work in Western Canada: A Sequel to “Words from the Women of Western Canada,” 56.
the anesthetic and I looked after the instruments and waited on the doctor. There was no sterilizer so we had to resort to boiling the instruments in a large saucepan with a steamer on it for towels and dressings.³

The Alberta District Nursing Service (ADNS, renamed the Municipal Nursing Service in 1950) was created in 1919 in response to a need for midwifery and emergency medical services in the province’s remote areas. Until 1924, maternal and infant mortality rates in Canada were highest in the Prairies, with maternity being second only to tuberculosis as the leading cause of death among women.⁴ It was women’s groups, most notably the United Farm Women of Alberta, who pressured the Liberal provincial government into creating the ADNS, which grew steadily from three nurses in 1919 to thirty-seven in 1951, and then declined until it was phased out in 1976. Throughout, municipal nurses provided “emergency treatment, obstetrical supervision, home nursing, immunization, and environmental sanitation in sparsely populated areas distant from medical and hospital services.”⁵

FIG 9-2 Women saw lumber for a homestead. Provincial Archives of Alberta A 6914.
Domestic and personal service jobs in Alberta accounted for a large percentage of jobs for women and girls: 46 percent of all employed females in 1911, 33.4 percent in 1921, and 37.8 percent in 1931. While most domestic servants were young unmarried women, married working-class women also worked as domestics in order to earn money for their families to survive. Emma Mohr tells the story of her mother, Catherine Henning, who worked as a maid in the early 1900s while her grandmother helped care for her and her siblings. The family lived in Josephsburg, a village northeast of Edmonton.

Mother decided to earn a bit of extra money to help buy the many necessary household items which were still needed. She got a part-time job as a maid for the Johnstone Walkers, owners of the first Johnstone Walker store in Edmonton. Her usual mode of transportation was on foot, and in order to save her shoes she walked barefoot and carried her shoes. She stayed in Edmonton three or four days a week, then walked home to see how things were. . . . Wages were very low, and were taken out in merchandise in some cases. She often talked about the time she worked for days to earn a fairly large tin box with a tight-fitting lid in which to store flour or any perishable food, as the house had no screen doors to keep out flies or insects. The Johnstone Walker store got its supplies packed in these tin boxes. This particular one had contained tea.

Wages for domestic servants were poverty wages, and the women were often isolated, particularly those who lived with the family for whom they worked. Employers generally expected them to be highly deferential. For these and other reasons — such as long hours, lack of privacy, and lack of prestige — factory work tended to be preferred over domestic work by many working-class women when they could get it, and Great Western Garment Company (GWG) would provide almost a century of women who had few other career prospects, and especially immigrant women, with factory employment. As Emma Gilbertson explained:

Before I was married and before I ever went to Edmonton [and worked at GWG], I kept the house for the school inspector in Camrose. His wife . . . passed away so I looked after three children for him for
fifteen months, kept house. . . . He married his second wife’s sister and when he was going to marry her, they wanted me to stay on and work and I didn’t want to ’cause . . . I was boss of, you know, in charge . . . of the kitchen and everything on my own. I didn’t want somebody to be over me.8

From an initial workforce of eight seamstresses, GWG quickly increased its staff to a hundred employees in the first year of operation. Sewing men’s work clothing for piecework rates rather than wages, “thousands of immigrants found their first jobs at the 97th street factory, learning English as they manufactured farmers’ overalls, soldiers’ uniforms and denim jeans.”9

Assunta Dotto, an Italian immigrant and sewing machine operator, was one of them. Initially, she had cleaned houses “for a dollar a day.” She preferred GWG, where she made lasting friendships:

There were two girls, Irma and Irene, that were born here. Our friendship lasted for sixty years. Irene especially was helping me with English. The girls in my line, they were really, really good . . . they never laughed if my pronunciation was bad. They helped me. A lot of times, we called on Irene to be the interpreter and if I misunderstood what they were saying, they all had a good laugh. I had a good circle of friends and I was really happy.10

While many women preferred factory work to domestic service, piecework made for hectic and generally poorly remunerated employment. Helen Allen, who started working at GWG in 1939 at the age of eighteen, said, “You didn’t get much for piecework. I mean, I think the average wage that I got would be between twelve and fifteen dollars a week, and that’s for a forty-eight-hour week.” In addition, sewing machine operators were not paid for time spent fixing mistakes: “If you made a mistake, you’d get the bundle back and you could rip, you might rip for a few hours a day. . . . You wouldn’t get paid for the ripping.”11

GWG also employed men, and, in common with other garment manufacturers throughout Canada, organized work based on gender. Men were generally employed as cutters and pressers while women worked as sewing machine operators. Women’s wages were lower than men’s: “In general,” notes historian Linda Kealey, “women’s work in the clothing trades was labeled unskilled or less skilled than men’s, and the sexual division of labour was reinforced by low wages.”12

Office work, once exclusively the domain of men, gradually opened to women in step with the concept of scientific management and new technologies in the office, such as the typewriter. Calgary’s eight stenographers and typists in 1902 had increased to 750 by 1914.13 While the office work environment was cleaner and safer than that of a factory, the jobs available to women in offices were also classified as low skilled and were therefore low paid, offering no opportunity for advancement. According to scholars Ruth Frager and Carmela Patrias, women “did not generally displace men, who continued to be hired as accountants and bookkeepers and for other jobs with prospects for advancement. Women took the new, routinized jobs. The monotonous, dead-end character of the work meant that they could be paid poorly.”14

In the early years of European settlement, women, particularly in urban centres, were limited to teaching
FIG 9-4 Teacher and pupils in a one-room school in Nisbet, 1908.
Glenbow Archives, NA-3976-35.
elementary school; secondary teaching, which was viewed as the instrument for moulding young men for the workforce, remained the domain of men.\textsuperscript{15} Unsurprisingly, elementary school teachers were paid far less than secondary school teachers, the early years of education being peculiarly viewed as requiring less skill to teach.\textsuperscript{16}

Women’s inferior economic status, particularly in Alberta’s growing urban centres, encouraged many women to become prostitutes. Prostitution expanded in Alberta with the construction of the CPR and an all-male labour force unable to bring their families with them.\textsuperscript{17} Similar imbalances between the sexes promoted prostitution in the early mining towns. In the late 1880s and early 1900s, the authorities had little incentive to curb prostitution since it helped make possible the retention of transient male workers.\textsuperscript{18} That changed, however, as the province’s population grew. Many early Alberta settlers were of Anglo-Saxon background and brought with them strict views concerning acceptable roles for women — namely, wife and mother. They demanded that the police crack down on prostitution and other “moral offences” such as drinking and gambling. In her examination of prostitution in Calgary between 1905 and 1914, Judy Bedford documents an increase in police arrests of prostitutes and keepers of common bawdy houses “to placate the angry moralists.”\textsuperscript{19}

Rather than recognize that most women who turned to prostitution did so for economic reasons, moralists and reformers blamed the “foreign element.” In fact, most prostitutes and johns were Anglo-Canadians, and a majority of prostitutes convicted in Calgary in 1914 were married women.\textsuperscript{20} That did not stop the newspapers from blaming Chinese employers of young women for prostitution, as the following excerpt from an editorial in the \textit{Lethbridge Herald} in 1909 reveals:

One of the most regrettable things noticed in the towns and cities of Western Canada is the presence of young girls working in semi-respectable restaurants and boardinghouses. These places, very often, are breeding places of crime of the worst kind. It is noticed particularly that in the Chinese places of the lower order young girls, fourteen, fifteen and sixteen years of age are employed and it is known their position there is anything but what it ought to be. These girls, and society, should be protected, even if against their own wills. . . . No girl under eighteen years of age should be allowed to work in these places, which are fatal to their moral well-being and therefore create and maintain a menace against society.”\textsuperscript{21}
Employment prospects for women remained precarious in the interwar period. In 1929, the Edmonton Journal reported a series of arrests of teenage girls who took up prostitution either because they couldn’t find work or could only find unremunerative jobs. For example, one young woman found work in the cafeteria of Ramsey’s Department Store, but the $7.50 per week that she earned did not even pay her room and board. “She took to wandering the streets as the only form of recreation available to a poor and lonely girl and shortly fell in with a taxi-driver. She began to share lodgings with him and he asked her to ‘hustle for him.’ . . . In the course of several months, Miss X moved from pimp to pimp.”

The movement of women into the paid workforce, whether as prostitutes or in legal occupations, did not occur without resistance before World War II. The reform movement, led by organizations such as the Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire and the National Council of Women of Canada, whose members were primarily middle- and upper-middle-class married women, objected to women working in the paid labour force because of the perceived negative impact on women’s health, femininity, and high moral standards. They felt it would lessen women’s desire to become wives and mothers, which were seen as their natural roles in a patriarchal society. Some of their objection to women having new opportunities for work, however, seems to have been based on self-interest: they wanted women to be available to work as domestics in their homes, and they therefore exempted paid domestic labour from their critique of women’s work.

But it was not only bourgeois reformers who objected to women working. So too did organized labour. In 1898, the Trades and Labour Congress (TLC) “called for the exclusion of women from the labour force as part of its platform of principles,” a position they held until 1914. The primary concern for the TLC was the impact of women workers on men’s jobs and wages. In their view, employers took advantage of the large number of women seeking work to push wages down, which then affected wages of male workers, whom the labour movement, along with the rest of society, regarded as the legitimate family “breadwinners.”

There was particular hostility to married women working. Women often stopped working for pay when they married, not only because of prevailing social attitudes but also because many employers would not employ married women. Even the federal government restricted the employment of married women until 1955. But most married women who took paid work did so either because their husbands earned wages too low to manage the household or because their husbands had died or deserted the family. The mothers’ allowance introduced by the provincial government in 1919 provided some assistance but was set well below the poverty level. John Lloyd recounts the story of his grandmother, who took a job working in a coal mine to support her family after her husband was killed:

It fell upon my grandmother’s shoulders to make a living for her young family, and this she did by taking a job at the pit head. The job: shoveling coal out of the mine cars that came up from underground. Because she was only a woman she got about half the wages of the men who did the same work alongside. . . . Money was scarce, and so she also took the job of caretaker at the local school.
Objections to women working grew during periods of high unemployment, such as the Great Depression of the 1930s. But despite pressures on women to free up jobs for unemployed men, the gendering of jobs meant that employers were usually hiring women and men for different jobs. There were relatively fewer job losses during the 1930s in the service and clerical jobs for which women were hired than in the jobs reserved mainly for men. Those “women’s jobs” paid poorly and were often fraught with dangers. Clare Botsford, working as a waitress in the 1930s from the age of twelve or thirteen, made a dollar a day for a twelve-hour shift and then walked home at two in the morning. “Your employer had no responsibility to see that you got home safely,” she said. “If you got hurt on the job, just don’t bother coming back. There was no workers’ compensation.”

Labour shortages inevitably drowned out the voices opposing paid work for women. During both world wars, with many Canadian men joining the armed forces, demand for women workers increased, and some were even hired to do jobs typically done by men, although for less pay. In World War II, women were hired to work in the munitions industry. Aircraft Repair in Edmonton opened shortly after the outbreak of the war to overhaul, repair, and assemble military aircraft. In 1943, it employed a thousand women in its workforce of twenty-four hundred. Some Alberta women also agreed to move to Ontario, sometimes on a temporary basis, to work in that province’s more substantial munitions industry. Norah Plumley Hook stayed in Alberta and later recalled her work experiences at Aircraft Repair:

I was hired on July 12, 1941, expecting that with sewing experience, I would be working in the fabric department. This was not meant to be. . . . Another girl and I were escorted to the Sheet Metal Department. As the first girls in that department, we were being tested, “to see if girls could do Sheet Metal work.” Our first job was filing — not fingernails or documents! . . . In due time, we went on to many different aspects of sheet metal work. We took out dents and straightened ailerons, cowlings, flaps and undercarriages and all metal parts with equally strange names.

The wartime economy also stimulated some expansion of traditional women’s employment. Government contracts went to GWG during both wars to manufacture soldiers’ uniforms. During World War II, “GWG workers, almost all women, were considered essential workers. The plant ran three shifts, 24 hours a day, seven days a week and produced 25,000 articles of military clothing a week.” Meanwhile, a shortage of teachers during the war caused school boards such as Edmonton Public Schools to remove their ban on the employment of married women as teachers.

But expanded opportunities for women’s work proved temporary. By 1951, only one-quarter of Canadian women of working age were in the labour force, and most were single women in traditional women’s labour ghettoes. Clerical work was on the increase for women. While it supplied just over 16 percent of jobs for females in 1931 in Alberta, that figure jumped to 28 percent in 1961 and almost 38 percent in 1981. A dramatic increase in women’s employment started in the 1960s in Alberta. The labour force participation
of females over ten had doubled between 1931 and 1961 to 26 percent. By 1991, when figures were kept for females over fifteen, the comparable figure was 59.5 percent, and in 2009, 64 percent. Since the mid-1970s, Alberta has had the highest percentage of employed women in Canada, although women’s employment in the province still remained 10 percent lower than men’s in 2009.

The increase in women’s employment occurred partly because of economic need, but such need was hardly new in the 1960s. A bigger factor may have been the gradual change in social attitudes regarding gender roles, as the second wave of feminism and the report in 1970 of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women attested. Anne Ozipko, a machine operator at GWG, told an often-heard story.

I started there in May ’44... I got a week off to get married in 1945. Then I went back to work. I worked until 1947. Then my son was born so I stayed home for a number of years. I didn’t go back to work until ... 1963. I had three kids and stayed at home with them. So when I came back, I went to work nightshift because my husband wasn’t in favour of my working. But I insisted I was going, so I worked from 4:30 to 11:30 every night, because we needed the money. Our son was very good in school and... he was almost ready for university and we couldn’t afford the tuition. The girls wanted a piano and I couldn’t afford a piano. So I went to work so I could make some money.

Like Anne Ozipko, postwar women tended not to leave the labour force when they married, waiting instead until they had their first child and then returning to work when their children were older. Gradually, it became common for women to leave paid work only for a brief period after giving birth. In 1976, the percentage of Canadian women who were both employed and had children under sixteen years of age living at home was 39.1 percent; in 2009, it was 72.9 percent. This has led to more women experiencing what is referred to as the “double burden” — a double workload of paid and unpaid labour, as women are still primarily responsible for household work and child care.

What has changed only slowly are the types of occupations in which most women are employed. While increasing numbers of women have entered professional and managerial jobs over time, most women workers, particularly in the public sector, continue to work in a narrow range of traditionally female occupational areas, including clerical and administration, sales and service, health care, and education. Furthermore, the jobs women hold in these areas tend to be at the lower level. While over time, more women were promoted to management positions, most have not risen above junior levels of management.

Not only has occupational segregation of women and men persisted over time; so too has pay inequality. In 1921, women’s annual wages as a proportion of men’s were 59 percent for Calgary and Edmonton, and in 2007, the median income for women employed full time was 66 percent of men’s full-time incomes, the worst figure for gender disparity of any Canadian province. That figure understates the real gender gap in wages because women made up 70 percent of the part-time workforce in Alberta in 2007.
WOMEN AND THE LABOUR MOVEMENT

One of the ways in which women workers have addressed their inferior economic status is through unionization. Though Alberta’s early unions were almost exclusively male, a notable exception was the United Garment Workers of America, which unionized the mostly female workforce at Edmonton’s GWG plant only three months after it opened in January 1911. Few other women were unionized because women’s work was viewed by employers as unskilled, meaning that they could be easily replaced if they agitated to improve their pay and working conditions. Many worked in isolation (e.g., as domestic servants) or in small workplaces that were difficult for unions to organize.

Another problem was the mainstream labour movement’s lack of interest in organizing women workers. Their primary goal was to secure a “family wage” for their members — “a wage big enough for a male breadwinner to support his wife and children. . . . As workers, women were seen as temporary, needing protection only while they laboured before marriage.” Organized labour sought this protection by advocating protective labour legislation, such as factory acts that reduced working hours and improved working conditions and minimum wage legislation. Alberta’s Factory Act was passed in 1917. It included “provision of a minimum wage of $1.50 per shift for all adults and $1.00 per shift for all apprentices in any factory, shop or office building,” making Alberta the first province to enact minimum wage legislation. But few women worked in factories. When the province did establish a minimum wage for women workers in 1920, it carefully excluded domestic workers and farm workers, thus leaving a substantial group of women without a minimum wage guarantee.

In 1922, the United Farmers of Alberta (UFA) government established a minimum wage board to set minimum wage rates for women in various industries. As in other provinces, its purpose was “to set wage rates for female wage-earners on an industry-by-industry basis after consultation with representative employers and employees.” That often produced limited protection for the workers. In retail, for example, companies were exempted from paying women minimum wage during the first year of their employment, which served as an incentive to fire women after their year’s “apprenticeship” was finished.

FIG 9-6 The United Garment Workers of America label used by GWG workers. Courtesy of the Alberta Labour History Institute.
Even at that, the board’s rulings were poorly enforced. For example, in May 1935, 150 waitresses and kitchen staff at twenty-five Edmonton restaurants went on strike at the height of the Depression because they were being paid on average $4.50 per week and working up to twelve hours a day, despite the minimum wage board having set their pay at $9.50 for a forty-hour week. Hundreds of unemployed men on relief, who were also on strike at the time, supported the women by joining their picket lines. The strikers formed the Restaurant Workers’ Union, and — with the help of the secretary-treasurer of the Edmonton Trades and Labour Council, Alf Farmilo — they were successful in getting the majority of restaurant owners to sign an agreement to pay the minimum wage.51

Much of women’s participation in the labour movement in the early history of the province was through women’s auxiliaries and union label campaigns. Most women’s auxiliaries were associated with crafts unions; one exception was the Western Federation of Miners auxiliary. Historian Linda Kealey suggests that the tasks women’s auxiliaries performed were mainly “stereotypically female” and “accentuated men’s roles in the workplace and women’s roles as supporters of trade unionism through their social and educational activities as wives, mothers, and consumers.”52 But in addition to organizing social events, women attended joint meetings with the union members. Auxiliaries also sometimes “featured access to insurance schemes that provided sickness and death benefits in an age in which no government or employment-related benefits were required.”53 The International Typographical Union women’s auxiliary was prominent in promoting the use of the union label. One of the organization’s vice-presidents, Mrs. B.W. Bellamy of Medicine Hat, was a major figure in the Western women’s auxiliary movement and, in 1918, became the first woman to participate officially in an Alberta Federation of Labour convention.

Alberta women were also active in the labour movement through the Women’s Labour Leagues (WLL). WLLs were socialist organizations that first appeared in Canada prior to World War I but became more widespread and active after the war, when they were
reinvigorated by the Communist Party of Canada (CPC). The Canadian Federation of Women’s Labour Leagues was formed in 1924, but the Trades and Labour Congress rejected the federation’s request for affiliation on the grounds that “a separate organization of women would ultimately weaken the working class movement; and that women had ample opportunity to join unions, and hence gain representation at conventions.” More likely, they rejected the WLLs because of their ties to the CPC.

By 1927, there were thirty-seven WLL locals across Canada, including affiliates in Calgary, Edmonton, Lethbridge, and communities in the Crowsnest Pass. Unlike women’s auxiliaries, WLL locals were unaffiliated with specific (male-dominated) crafts unions, and, while they undertook some of the same activities as women’s auxiliaries, their main focus was the rights of women workers. They advocated for the unionization of women workers and supported their use of the strike as a way to fight for better pay and working conditions. They also pressured governments to pass protective labour legislation — at the same time, “keeping an eye on the limits of legislative initiatives and, whenever they could, exposing violations.” For example, the Calgary WLL had pressed for the creation of the Minimum Wage Board and for a working-class woman to be appointed to it to represent her class. Subsequently, Edmontonian Harriet J. Ingam, president of the Garment Workers’ Union, was indeed named to the board. They were unsuccessful, however, in getting the government to include domestic workers within the minimum wage legislation.

The Calgary WLL was founded in 1919 by Mary Corse and Jean McWilliam. Corse was a trustee on the Calgary Board of Education, a voting delegate on the Calgary Trades and Labour Council, a member of the International Typographical Union women’s auxiliary, and an activist in the Dominion Labour Party. McWilliam was president of the Calgary Defence Committee for jailed strikers and founded the Women of Unemployed Committee. She also ran a boarding house “where radicals were welcome and able to enlist her support.” Both women testified before the federal government’s Royal Commission on Industrial Relations in 1919 (the Mathers Commission). They argued that the low pay and poor working and living conditions that most women workers experienced were a source of resentment and radicalism. Jean McWilliam testified:

I was put on a committee to investigate conditions in the hotels and restaurants around the city here. Girls were living with sleeping accommodation down in the basement. . . . One little girl got into trouble and her baby was born three months after she was married. The baby was only four pounds in weight because the girl almost starved to death. That little girl’s baby died on the 14th of this month of malnutrition and starvation. . . . Death has entered her family, who is responsible?

However, even though they fought to improve the lives and working conditions of women, the WLLs did not challenge prevailing social attitudes about women’s roles. They opposed the right of married women with employed husbands to work and petitioned the Calgary School Board in 1923 “to reduce married women on staff, supporting instead the concept of a family wage and married women’s duty to raise a family.” This was
also the position of the Federation of Women’s Labour Leagues: its national newspaper, *The Woman Worker*, argued in favour of the male breadwinner model.60

It wasn’t until the 1960s and 1970s that the rate of unionization of women workers began to increase significantly, paralleling the sharp increase in women’s labour market participation, particularly in the public sector. As outlined in chapters 6 to 8, unionization in the public sector proceeded rapidly in the 1960s and 1970s, and after 1960 women became increasingly prominent in strikes and union leadership in Alberta. Today, over two-thirds of all women in Canada who are covered by a union work in the public sector.61 In 2008, women’s unionization rate in the public sector was 71.9 percent, compared to 68.5 percent for men, while in the private sector only 12.2 percent of women were covered by a union, compared to 19.8 percent of men.62

What has been the impact of unionization on women? First, unions have had a positive impact on women’s wages. Nationally, in 2003, women aged fifteen and over who were covered by a union contract earned an average of $19.94 an hour, compared with $14.55 an hour for women not covered by a union, thus making the union wage premium 37 percent.63 The union wage premium for men was 17.7 percent. Of course, other factors also influence wages, such as public versus private sector employment. When these are factored out, according to the Equal Pay Coalition, “women in unionized jobs earn, on average, $2 more than non-unionized women in similar jobs.”64

Some activists became involved in their union because they recognized its role in improving their wages and wanted to keep it strong. Cindy McCallum Miller, a postal worker and Canadian Union of Postal Workers activist in Banff, Alberta, recalled how she became an instant activist:

> I was only hired for the summer, but it so happened that two of the part timers had moved on, so there were two vacancies and I got one of them. On September 30, my probation ended and I became a part timer, and the next day I became local secretary-treasurer. I did that . . . because it was a small local and the people had held positions so long that they were really looking for someone else to start taking on the responsibility. I was approached by one of the long-time activists and I said, “Yeah, whatever you need.” She was quite
shocked that I would volunteer so quickly. I said, “I owe you something and this is my way of paying back.” She said, “You don’t owe me anything.” I said, “No, not you particularly, but I owe this local something. I owe this union something.” . . . At that time we were making $11.86 an hour. That was double what anybody else in Banff was making. If you were working in a gift store, you were making $4.50 to $5.00 an hour. If you were working at the local banks, you might be making a little bit more. If you were in a position of responsibility in one of the hotels, you might be making $7 an hour. I made $11.86 the day I walked into that job. That wasn’t because all of a sudden somebody out there had recognized all these great skills that I’d always had. It was because of that collective agreement and because of those struggles. So I knew that I owed somebody something.65

The female-male wage gap within the unionized workforce is also significantly lower than in the non-unionized workforce. In 2010, women covered by a union earned 93.7 percent of what men covered by a union earned, whereas women not covered by a union earned only 79.4 percent of what their male counterparts earned.66 One of the ways in which organized labour has attempted to address the disparity between women’s and men’s incomes in the last few decades is by advocating for pay equity. Pay equity goes beyond the notion that women and men doing the same job should receive the same pay; it also includes efforts to compare the value of jobs that are dissimilar. This involves establishing criteria for comparing different jobs: educational requirements, complexity of tasks, degree of responsibility, degree of danger, and the like. Thus,
pay equity is summed up in the phrase “equal pay for work of equal value.” In other words, as the Alberta Federation of Labour Women’s Committee noted, “a woman doesn’t have to do the same job as a man to qualify for the same pay. Instead, if her lower paid job is equal in value to a higher paying one done by a man, then she gets paid the same wages.” This involves recognizing that women historically have been ghettoized in certain low-paying occupations and attempting “to correct the undervaluing of work traditionally done by women” by examining and comparing the skill, effort, responsibility, and working conditions of typically female and male jobs through a job evaluation process.

Susan Keeley, a former daycare worker for the City of Calgary, explained how daycare workers for the city used the concept of pay equity to get their wages raised in the 1980s and onwards. First, she and her unionized co-workers “went to the city and talked to them about our wages and how low we were paid. We got a 15 percent wage increase in between contracts because of that.” In turn, that proved to be “basically the real impetus to get the job evaluation program off the ground. Through that job evaluation program, the daycare workers received another 47 percent wage increase.” For Keeley, the progress that the local made galvanized her to become a committed activist.

While many unions have sought wage parity during collective bargaining, they have also advocated for pay equity legislation, with an emphasis on employer responsibility rather than complaint-driven action. Union women view this legislative focus as especially advantageous because it would make pay equity a universal right rather than simply a collective-bargaining goal for the minority of working women who enjoy union protection. Currently, Alberta is the only province without either pay equity legislation or a pay equity negotiation framework. The only recourse for women who feel they are suffering pay discrimination because of their gender is through the Alberta Human Rights Commission, which can be costly and exhausting; furthermore, Alberta human rights law only guarantees equal pay for equal work.

In addition to higher wages, unionized workers have higher non-wage benefits (e.g., pensions, health plans, paid time off work) than their non-unionized counterparts. A unionized worker is three times more likely to have an employer-sponsored pension plan and twice as likely to have a medical plan than is a non-union worker. A benefit of particular concern to working women is maternity leave, which includes two important elements: job-protected leave, which is the right of women to take time off work during pregnancy and after the birth of their child while retaining entitlement to the job they held at the same pay and benefits they enjoyed before the leave; and the provision of pay and benefits during the period of leave. Both of these are reinforced by Article 10.2 of the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, which was ratified by Canada in 1967. The article, in an effort to protect the right to work for all women, calls for “measures . . . to prevent their dismissal in the event of marriage or maternity,” “paid maternity leave with the guarantee of returning to former employment,” and “the necessary social services, including childcare facilities.”
MATERNITY LEAVE

Legislation guaranteeing security of employment while on maternity leave is a provincial responsibility except for federal employees, who are covered by federal labour standards. Alberta was one of the last provinces to enact such legislation. In 1975, the government introduced Bill 71, an amendment to the *Alberta Labour Act*. In moving the second reading, Minister of Labour Neil Crawford acknowledged that some unions had negotiated maternity leave in their collective agreements and that “the benefits of this progressive type of thinking” should be extended to other workers not covered by these agreements.73 For example, Civic Service Union 52, which represents many City of Edmonton employees, won limited job-protected maternity leave in 1967. Female employees who resigned for maternity reasons were to be considered as having been on leave without pay if they accepted re-employment with the city within six months of the date of their resignation.

However, Bill 71 did not guarantee job-protected maternity leave for all women: the amendment stated only that the Labour Board *may* make an order requiring an employer to grant a pregnant employee maternity leave without pay for up to twelve weeks before the estimated date of delivery of the child and six weeks after the birth of the child. It wasn’t until 1980 that the Alberta government enacted maternity leave legislation with which all employers were required to comply. The amount of leave was basically the same as that contained in Bill 71, but to be eligible, a worker had to have been employed by her employer for at least twelve months.

Upon recommendation of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women, the federal government began providing income support for expectant and new mothers in 1971 through the unemployment insurance (UI) system. Mothers with twenty or more insurable weeks could claim up to fifteen weeks of benefits after a two-week waiting period, but since Alberta did not have maternity leave legislation at that time, Albertans who took maternity leave to claim UI benefits risked losing their job. In 1990, the *Unemployment Insurance Act* was amended to include ten weeks of parental leave, which could be used by either parent, in addition to maternity leave. In 2000, parental leave was increased to thirty-five weeks, thereby increasing maternity and paternity leave from six months to a year.

GETTING MATERNITY LEAVE

When an Edmonton dental hygienist asked for maternity leave from the four-person dental office where she worked in late July 1990, she was unaware of her rights under provincial labour law. She told her employer of two years that she would come back 22 weeks later, that is, the beginning of January. He agreed verbally and she thought everything was set. But that November, the 25-year-old hygienist got a call from the dentist who told her he decided to keep her replacement instead. “At that time (November) he was sort of indicating that he might not want me back because I wouldn’t be reliable,” she said. “Even before I left he was asking me what I would do if the baby was sick. . . . That’s some way to treat an employee after two years of service. That’s the hardest part — being treated like that.”

Only after the changes to the *Unemployment Insurance Act* in 2000 did Alberta feel compelled to extend its maternity provisions and introduce paternity provisions to match the federal Employment Insurance (EI) regulations. Before the changes were implemented in 2001, Alberta had the shortest maternity leave provision in Canada — just eighteen weeks (Quebec provided a full year). Audrey Cormack, Alberta Federation of Labour president at the time, welcomed the changes, commenting that “mirroring the changes made to federal EI creates a level of jurisdictional equity that we rarely see in Alberta.”

Many unionized workers on maternity leave have the benefit of additional income support through their collective agreement. The first national union to win paid maternity leave for its members was the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW). It was one of their key demands in their 1981 strike. Before the strike, CUPW’s collective agreement with the Treasury Board provided six months unpaid maternity leave with no accumulation of annual leave credits and no superannuation contributions. Men were entitled to only one day of paid leave for the birth of a child, and all members to one day of paid leave for adoption of a child. CUPW’s program of demands going into the 1981 negotiations included twenty weeks paid maternity leave and five days each of paid paternity and adoption leave. The Treasury Board offered twenty-six weeks unpaid maternity leave, which could be taken by either parent. The board also offered to pay the equivalent of unemployment insurance (UI) benefits for the two-week waiting period during which claimants received no UI benefits but was unwilling to increase paid paternity and adoption leave beyond one day.

Frustrated with the progress of negotiations, CUPW requested a conciliation board. In the meantime, they prepared educational materials on the key issues under dispute, which they distributed both to their members and externally. The backgrounder on parental rights was distributed to hundreds of women’s groups. As sociologist Julie White notes, it stated the union’s position that child bearing was a social as well as an individual responsibility, that women workers were penalized financially for their role in child bearing and fathers deprived of the opportunity to fully participate. . . . [It] also pointed out how little cost was involved, given that only one percent of the total number of employees took maternity leave each year.

The cost to the employer was estimated at 0.25 percent of payroll or two cents per hour per employee. In June, the Conciliation Board report recommended seventeen weeks paid and nine weeks unpaid maternity leave, as well as two days each of paid paternity and adoption leave. CUPW accepted the recommendation as the basis for further negotiation; the Treasury Board did not.

The strike began on 29 June and ended on 12 August. In the last days of the strike, the union won seventeen weeks paid maternity leave, though paid paternity and adoption leave remained at one day each. In her analysis of the strike, Julie White argues that feminists in CUPW faced quite a challenge in persuading members as a whole that paid maternity leave was not only a just demand but worth striking for. Women were a minority in the union at only 43 percent of
the membership. However, resistance came not only from male members but also from older women who had gotten by without it and thought that younger women were being too demanding in expecting this benefit. The union, however, kept the issue alive. As Pat Miller, CUPW national director for the Western Region, put it:

There was a lot of shouting and yelling from inside the union, “What the hell am I on strike for — maternity leave?” We overcame that . . . And as we went along we convinced those that weren’t convinced, and the momentum swayed. . . . That was just another segment for the education process on the rights of women and the problems of women. It woke up a lot of people.77

Ten years after CUPW’s historic strike, another step forward with respect to maternity leave was made when an Alberta human rights board of inquiry ruled in favour of Alberta nurse Susan Parcels that women are eligible for the same benefits as employees on sick leave during the health-related portion of their maternity leave, that period when their doctor says they are unable to work. The Alberta Health Care Association appealed the ruling to the Court of Queen’s Bench, but it was upheld in April 1992. The first time Parcels had taken maternity leave, she was in a management position and the employer — Red Deer Auxiliary Hospital — had covered her benefits. So in 1989, when she informed them she was taking a second maternity leave, she was surprised to be told she had to prepay all of her benefits:

When I went down to human resources and said I need to make arrangements for my coverage to continue while I’m off for the next six months they said, “Okay, you’ll need to prepay eight hundred and some odd dollars.” I said, “Why? . . . I didn’t do this before.” . . . I said I had to have coverage because I am the sole provider for our benefits for our family.78

Parcels’s husband had just learned about a recent Supreme Court decision (Brooks v. Safeway) in which the court ruled that pregnancy is a valid health-related reason to be absent from work and therefore must be treated like other health-related absences. So Parcel filed a complaint with the Alberta Human Rights Commission. Even though the United Nurses of Alberta (UNA) was named in her complaint, they supported her from the beginning: “There were so many good people that were just right behind me. I have to say, UNA was one of them. They were named in the claim . . . because the collective agreement was gender biased, was sexually discriminatory, so they were named. But they never acted like they were on the opposite side of my case — ever.” 79

Apart from better wages and benefits, women have benefited from unionization in terms of human rights. Collective agreement provisions related to pay structures, promotions, and layoffs “tend to minimize the most overt forms of discrimination on the basis of gender and race,” as one labour advocate has noted.80 Many unions have also negotiated clauses to mitigate sexual harassment in the workplace. For example, as the result of a sexual harassment case won by the union, Canada Post was ordered by an arbitrator to provide an anti-sexual harassment course.
for its supervisors and employees. Sociologist Julie White examined data collected in 1992 from 1,235 collective agreements covering close to 2.5 million workers in Canada and found that 63.1 percent of these workers were covered by an agreement with an anti-discrimination provision and 42.7 percent with a sexual harassment provision.

Of course, women who have no union at all are only covered by the limited benefits and protections that employers are required to provide by law. Some “pink ghettos” in which women have been able to unionize in other provinces, such as child care, remain largely non-unionized in Alberta. While Quebec’s public daycare system is heavily unionized, only a small group of civic-run daycares are unionized in Alberta. The result is that child care workers are better remunerated overall in Quebec than in Alberta, though wages overall in Alberta are far higher than Quebec. Sociologist Tom Langford argues in a recent book on daycare in Alberta that the low level of unionization in daycare reflects a “power deficit” for Alberta women: “As a consequence, with very few exceptions, workers lack the institutional means to directly bargain for a distribution of resources that better reflects their valuable contributions to child care.”

**WOMEN’S STRUGGLES WITHIN UNIONS**

While women have clearly benefited from unionization, they have had to fight and organize within their unions in order to get the labour movement to pay attention to and take action on issues of concern to them. In the course of doing so, they have come up against sexism and discrimination. Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) activist Clancy Teslenko recalled:

**SUSAN PARCELS, NURSE**

I didn’t want to be front row centre. I wanted the process to continue without me being some sort of figurehead for it. It feels awkward when something is about you and it’s that controversial. I come from rural central Alberta and I was raised in a very traditional community setting. I had a great upbringing. . . . But it didn’t prepare me for the world of working women outside of that community; . . . you’re either going to get married to a farmer or you’re going to go and be a teacher or a nurse. That’s the traditional way that women in the rural community looked for the next step in their life. Am I going to be a wife and a mother or am I going to be a nurse or a teacher? You didn’t often get both. So at seventeen, I was . . . like okay, I’ve been a candy striper for three years, I guess this means I go to nursing. . . . So when I came back to this community and I had made this noise with the Human Rights Commission, my family. . . . couldn’t believe it. . . . No, that’s not our granddaughter, or niece. That’s not our cousin. Because it really did play with their traditional beliefs. . . . They’re Social Credits from way back. . . . You don’t do this. You don’t take your government to court and change things like this.

SOURCE: Interview with Susan Parcels, Edmonton, n.d., ALHI.
I remember going to a CUPE convention in Lethbridge . . . By that time, I was married and I had a child . . . There was a resolution that I had written and put forward . . . about providing subsidies for child care. I not only did that. I had resolutions on health and safety. I had resolutions on government issues, political issues, everything. I wasn’t focused on women’s rights. When this resolution came up, I had gone up to the mike and spoke on it. As I was leaving the mike, . . . one of the brothers turned to me and said, “Why don’t you stay home with your kids?” I was absolutely floored that he would say that to me. At that point it was 1990. The unions had been talking about equal rights. There’d been acceptance at the national [level] . . . So I went back in and I went to the mike and I said that I couldn’t believe what had just happened on this floor. From there, the rally started. After I got off the mike, I don’t know how many brothers and how many sisters got up and condemned what was done . . . The president of his local came and talked to me and I told him what happened. He went and dealt with that member, and that member came and apologized. For that to happen was a big thing. We actually ended up being quite good friends after that. It was more of an “okay, I’ve done wrong. I’m here to learn.”

One of the ways in which women have raised issues and pressed for change is by forming women’s committees. These committees’ activities have ranged from advocating changes within the unions of benefit to women to discussing model clauses to be obtained through collective bargaining and to struggles for broader social change. The Alberta Federation of Labour (AFL) Women’s Committee was established in 1983. In 1985, its members brought forward resolution #85/401 at the AFL’s twenty-ninth annual convention to establish four new positions specifically for women on the AFL Executive Council. The purpose of this affirmative action resolution was to address underrepresentation of women in leadership positions within the AFL. In 1987, in celebration of the AFL’s seventy-fifth anniversary, the Women’s Committee published a collection of essays on topics ranging from the effects of technology and free trade on women to the need for publicly funded daycare. In 1989, they called for a woman labour activist to be honoured annually at an AFL event in recognition of International Women’s Day (8 March). The first award went to Jean Ross of the Canadian Union of Public Employees in 1990. The committee has also organized forums on equality, raised funds for organizations such as the Alberta Council of Women’s Shelters, written policy papers on topics such as child labour and violence against women, and held women’s caucuses at the AFL/CLC schools.

In recent decades, unions and the AFL have made efforts to address issues of concern to women and improve their economic and social position in the workplace and society. However, there is still much work to be done. The persistent gender wage gap is a reminder of larger gender inequalities throughout Alberta. Gender inequality also continues within the labour movement itself: for example, men are overrepresented in senior elected and staff positions within unions while women are concentrated at lower levels. Organized labour has undertaken measures to increase the participation of women in unions — for example, by providing child care for women to attend conventions and schools — but more can be done. The workload often expected
of union activists and leaders is a barrier to women, particularly those who have family responsibilities.87

The 1987 AFL Women’s Committee’s collection of essays includes one by a male unionist — Bill Ber-ezowski — who was a member and staffer for the International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers, who served on a number of AFL committees, and whom the Women’s Committee called their “honorary feminist.” His challenge to the labour movement to fight for gender equality still rings true today:

The fact that, after a millennium of generations, women still get the “dirtiest” and least rewarding jobs, are still the last hired, first fired and last promoted and are still paid less for the work they perform than their male counterparts is not only a blot on our civilization but a blot on the labour movement as a whole. Unless such issues as that of equal pay for work of equal value are raised to the level of importance we grant to changing unfair labour laws, solving unemployment and winning strikes, never will the extra burden be lifted from the shoulders of our sister workers. Nor will we win the other battles bosses and governments place before us. Simple arithmetic proves the point. More than half of the actual or potential work force is women. Unless this half comes forward in full equality, the labour movement battles with one arm.88

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MARILYN WARREN, PUBLIC SERVICE ALLIANCE OF CANADA (PSAC)

In 1976, I was chosen as the Alberta and NWT Co-ordinator for our union’s Equal Opportunities for Women program. . . . I would also be a member of a small group of women who would try to get funding. . . . The time came for the resolution to hit the floor. We were sure we would have a fight on our hands but we had right on our side, so we couldn’t lose, right? . . . To make a long, sordid story short, those speakers who were to speak for us didn’t and to make matters worse they spoke against us. . . . We lost the funding and I lost my illusion as to how much our “brothers” wanted to help us. Brotherhood was only for brothers, not sisters. . . . I was elected to attend the next convention and made sure a proposal for funding was in the resolutions. I found things had changed somewhat. . . . Many of the old power brokers [were gone] . . . There were also more women at this convention. . . . When we called a women’s caucus, one hundred and fifteen women attended . . . a change from three years ago, when twenty-four of us showed up. . . . When the resolution came to the floor I was first at the mike. . . . When my five minutes were up, members of our Alberta Caucus took up the cause. We stacked the mikes four deep and before we were all through, the last member called for the question. It was wonderful! We had our 1¢. . . . It was a start.

FIG 10-1  African-Canadian railway porters.
Courtesy of the Alberta Labour History Institute.