

January 2011

TO ALL CUPE CHARTERED ORGANIZATIONS

Dear Sisters and Brothers:

MARCH 8 – INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

This year March 8 will mark the 100th anniversary of International Women's Day (IWD) as a day to celebrate the achievements and struggles of women. It was in 1910 in Copenhagen that the delegates to the second Socialist International Conference unanimously agreed to establish a day to highlight the struggles of women for equal rights, including universal suffrage. The first IWD was celebrated the following year, in March 1911.

Also in March 1911 the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire in New York City killed more than 140 young working women, most of whom were immigrants. This tragedy highlighted the demands women were making for improved working conditions and was used as a call for mobilizing participation in International Women's Day marches.

Nineteen hundred eleven (1911) was also the year in which American poet James Oppenheim wrote the poem "Bread and Roses", which later became a song. The powerful words – "Our lives shall not be sweated from birth until life closes; hearts starve as well as bodies – give us bread, but give us roses" – became the anthem of the women's movement in its fight for an improved quality of life as well as for economic security.

Just a year later, in 1912, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) strike marked another important event. Textile workers, over half of whom were women and children, took to the streets of Lawrence, Massachusetts. It was one of the first strikes involving women and immigrant workers and became known as the *Bread and Roses Strike* because of a picket sign carried by one of the striking women, which read "We Want Bread, But Roses Too!" It became not only the rallying cry of the strike, but also of other industrial organizing efforts, signifying that the largely unskilled immigrant workers sought not just economic justice but also recognition of their basic humanity, human rights, and dignity.

As we look back at these seminal events in women's labour history, it is also important to reflect on the history of women in CUPE. In 1970 the Royal Commission on the Status of Women submitted its report and recommendations on how to improve the situation of women in Canada. Building on this, at the 1971 Convention CUPE adopted a program titled "The Status of Women in CUPE" aimed at making progress on those Royal Commission recommendations which were applicable to CUPE members.

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Four years later, 1975 was celebrated as International Women's Year, and CUPE produced a report called "*The New Status of Women in CUPE*" to review the progress made in implementing the 1971 recommendations.

Much has changed over the past 40 years. We've gotten rid of overt discriminatory practices like separate wage schedules for men and women, and the requirement that women quit their job if they married. However, many of the issues identified in the 70s remain a problem, including the lack of pay equity, limited access to child care, the lack of universal coverage for full pay during maternity/parental leave, limited access to good pensions and benefits, and the under-representation of women at all levels of the union.

The 2007 CUPE National Women's Task Force (NWTF) continued this tradition of internal reflection through its study of ways to improve the status of women in the union. The NWTF made several recommendations and while not everything has been accomplished, there have been a number of significant steps, including the holding of the Bargaining Women's Equality Conference, the development of the Code of Conduct, the creation of more user-friendly Model By-Laws, and the inclusion of Equality modules in the Steward Training course. Work to implement the recommendations continues, including a project to look at ways of dealing with the negative impact of increased casualization on women and other marginalized groups.

CUPE recognizes that our work must continue on behalf of all women. The economic crisis has had a devastating effect on hundreds of thousands of Canadian workers, including many women who have lost jobs, and who have minimal access to Employment Insurance (EI) benefits. Women also continue to experience wage discrimination, unequal access to training and education, a shortage of affordable housing, and a lack of quality non-profit child care. For Aboriginal and racialized women the situation is even more stark. Economic inequality, racial discrimination, harassment and violence are a constant reality.

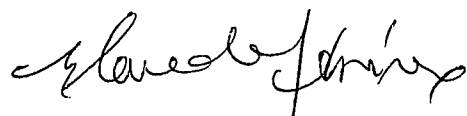
Just recently the 2010 National Report Card on Child and Family Poverty indicated that rates of child and family poverty are high in all provinces across the country, and that the gap between rich and poor has widened over the past few years. It is no surprise that a recent report on gender equality by the World Economic Forum showed that Canada has fallen behind the United States in a ranking that measures women's economic and educational attainment, political empowerment, health and survival.

CUPE proudly celebrates the legacy of the brave women who marched in the streets 100 years ago, and supports those who continue the fight today. We have developed a new poster (attached) to mark the historic significance of this year's 100th anniversary of International Women's Day. The poster, titled "*What we've achieved is just the beginning*", marks past accomplishments and takes aim at future objectives. We encourage your local to get involved in March 8 activities in your region to add your voice to this celebration.

In solidarity,



PAUL MOIST
National President



CLAUDE G N REUX
National Secretary-Treasurer