

# Cuts, Privatization And Deregulation: A Look At The Impact of Some New Right Government Policies On Women

*Sue Skipton*

## ABSTRACT

Free trade economics underlies government cuts in social programs, privatization and deregulation. The increasing fragmentation of women's work in a sexually segregated labour market means that cuts in UI, CPP and funding for health, post-secondary education and social services, combined with privatization and deregulation, will hit many women particularly hard.

## RÉSUMÉ

L'économie du libre-échange est à la base des coupures gouvernementales dans les programmes sociaux, de la privatisation et de la déréglementation. L'accroissement de la fragmentation du travail des femmes dans un marché du travail ségrégué sexuellement signifie que les coupures dans l'AE, le RPC, et les fonds pour la santé, les études post secondaires et les services sociaux en plus de la privatisation et la déréglementation touchera de façon particulièrement importante un grand nombre de femmes.

Free trade philosophy and economics now permeate virtually all federal and most provincial government policies and documents. Government announcements and documents frequently assert the need to move away from what is perceived as too much dependence on government, on the grounds that if citizens were to be subjected to the rigours of the marketplace then they would be forced to become more productive and more competitive. A key method of reducing the role of the state is through the dismantling of government programs through cutbacks, privatization and deregulation. Over the last few years, virtually all publicly funded programs have been under review in order to make them more suited to the (so-called) new, global economy. Deficit budgeting, incorporating an overriding concern with the "bottom line", and a distorted model of public finance, has justified and buttressed this erosion of government from the economy and everyday lives of Canadians.

Labour and social activists prefer to call this set of ideas and policies derived from free market economics 'the corporate agenda', because the term recognizes just who, materially, benefits from its implementation. Cutting social programs, particularly income security, together with the removal of any

mandatory standards in the workplace and environment, is understood as a major part of this agenda, which is to move quickly towards a low wage economy with very few restrictions on corporate activities, enabling higher and higher profits.

As a researcher and policy analyst within the labour movement, and as a New Democratic Party (NDP) candidate during the 1996 provincial election in Newfoundland and Labrador, I have taken part in the struggle against the systematic dismantling of our social programs and the steady erosion of the concepts of collective responsibility and universality.

To understand how policies inspired by free market philosophy impact on women, we need to examine how cuts, privatization and deregulation operate in the context of hierarchical power relations embedded and interconnected in the workplace, the family and a sexually segregated labour market. For analytical convenience, I will discuss federal government programs first, before moving on to a provincial focus. A section on how mutually reinforcing cuts, privatization and deregulation result in a poorer quality of life for women in general is followed by a look at how women can fight back against the corporate agenda.

## UI TO EI AND THE PENALTIES FOR WOMEN

In 1996 the federal government's new Employment Insurance Act introduced massive UI cuts affecting eligibility and benefits. These cuts occurred despite a projected surplus of over \$5 billion in the UI fund by the end of the year. By the time these cuts take their full effect, only 33% of jobless workers will be eligible for the new "EI", whereas in 1989 87% of unemployed Canadians qualified (Canadian Labour Congress [CLC], 1996a). Those who do qualify will experience a dramatic reduction in their benefits.

A recent CLC report of a two-year study on the impact of economic restructuring on women's work described the steady decline of full-year employment in conjunction with the rapidly increasing fragmentation of Canadian women's work:

For women, full-time, full-year jobs have virtually disappeared. In 1996, all of the growth in jobs for women was in the part-time category. Job losses on the other hand, in the public sector and in manufacturing, have resulted in fewer full-time positions available to women. The results are as would be expected. The wage gap is beginning to widen--after a very brief period of narrowing. Women are increasingly found working more than one job to make ends meet. (1997, p. 17)

In 1995 the official unemployment rate for women was 9.2%, but for young women under 24 it was 15.6%, and as high as 26% in 1994 in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador. The unemployment rate in 1991 for visible minority women was 13.4%, for women with disabilities 16.6%, and for aboriginal women 17.7%. Only 14% of disabled women were unable to work, and 65% of women with disabilities who were unemployed wanted to work. Only 45% of the disabled women who were able to work were employed full-time (CLC, 1997).

Bearing in mind the increasing fragmentation of women's work and their increased likelihood of unemployment, the new "EI" will

discriminate against women both in terms of eligibility and level of benefits. From January 1997 eligibility is based on hours rather than weeks worked. The government has made this a particular selling point of its reforms, alleging that it will help part-time workers, the majority of whom are women, because all their hours are insurable. However, upon close examination this advantage is far outweighed by the increase in work needed to qualify; the net result will be more women paying into the EI fund with very little likelihood of ever becoming eligible for benefits in the event of unemployment.

The qualifying work period has, in effect, more than doubled from 12 weeks at a minimum of 15 hours a week (180 hours) to 420 hours over a 52 week period. Moreover, women who apply for maternity, sick or parental benefits will now require 700 hours work instead of the previous 20 weeks at a minimum of 15 hours a week (300 hours). The largest number of women working part-time are between the ages of 25 and 44 years and it is this group who draw on maternity and parental benefits; it will be very difficult now for many of these women to qualify for special benefits. To compound this problem, new entrants to the workforce will have to work 910 hours compared to the previous 300 hours, making it nearly impossible for many younger women who do not work full-time, full-year to qualify for sick or maternity benefits. Older women who are reentering the workforce will also need 910 hours to qualify for unemployment benefits, another rule change that disproportionately affects women (Human Resources Development Canada, 1996; CLC, 1996b).

Given that women work an average of 30 hours weekly while men average 39 hours, it will usually take women much longer to qualify for the new EI, whether for unemployment or special benefits. Women with regular part-time work will find it difficult enough to qualify, but with the increasing shift to short-term casual work with varied hours, more and more women have an extremely irregular work pattern, and many of them will be unable to claim any EI at all. Women with part-time and/or irregular work who do manage to qualify will be penalized again, in comparison to men, by the new

method of calculating average weekly earnings, a percentage of which comprises the actual amount of weekly benefit. We should remember, too, that even before changes in the rules, usually any percentage of women's average weekly earnings results in lower benefits than men's, because of the wage gap.

From January 1997, a new 'divisor' rule has been used to calculate average weekly earnings which normally includes zero or low income weeks in a benefit calculation period of 26 weeks immediately before the filing of an EI claim. This results in a lower average earnings figure than under the old method, unless a person has worked in a full-time regular job. With the increasing fragmentation of women's work, many will be particularly hard hit by this divisor rule, despite some political, cosmetic tinkering with the formula in March 1997.

To compound the effect of this new divisor rule, from January 1997 an 'intensity' rule or 'frequent claimant' penalty has been applied so that the claimant's benefit rate will drop by a percentage point for every 20 weeks of EI use within a 5 year period, to a low of 50%. Previously, the standard benefit was calculated as 55% of average weekly earnings. One of the amendments the federal government introduced to counteract some strong criticism of the intensity rule was an exemption from the rule for low income families. However, eligibility for this exemption and a higher benefit rate of up to 65% is assessed on the basis of family and not individual income. This method ignores patriarchal relations of power in the home, assuming that income is shared equally. It ultimately erodes what little economic independence many women have, making it more difficult for women to leave abusive relationships.

Of course, the full effect of the frequent claimant rule will take a little longer to have its full effect, but it will mean triple jeopardy for the many women who rely on irregular part-time or casual work. They are less likely to qualify than under the old system, and if they do manage to accumulate enough hours, their benefits will be much lower because of both the divisor and frequent claimant penalties.

These new ways of calculating benefits are a key part of the federal government's determination

to cut unemployment insurance payments and hence remove what they refer to in all EI documentation as the "disincentive to work". The same mindset lies behind cuts in social assistance imposed by some provincial governments already, and which most other provinces will probably follow as a result of federal government cuts in transfer funding. Characteristic of the New Right in their "reforms" of government programs, cuts in UI benefits completely ignore structural unemployment, the gendered nature of the labour market, and the changes in work patterns brought about by economic restructuring.

In particular, they do not take into account the changes in women's work, and their increasingly tenuous attachment to the labour force, particularly younger women, visible minority women, women with disabilities and aboriginal women. Many women in the latter groups will be severely penalized by the new EI rules, and will find it more and more difficult to access income security in times of unemployment.

#### **CANADA PENSION PLAN AND OLDER WOMEN**

During the summer of 1996, the federal government with the provincial governments, conducted a review of the Canadian public pension program (CPP). Pressures from the corporate community to cut pension benefits emerged in a government consultation paper, which included strong arguments for cuts in future pension benefits, de-indexing of pensions, removal of death benefits, and a move away from disability benefits.

Not surprisingly, in the current political climate, a major thrust of the consultation paper was to strengthen private pension plans while cutting the public pension program. We know that many women do not have private pensions; and in 1991 only 22% of women without private pensions contributed to an RRSP (Townson, 1995). Most senior women, therefore, are entirely dependent upon the CPP for their income security.

In February 1997 the federal government tabled draft legislation to amend the CPP which, somewhat surprisingly, revealed that the Cabinet had at least taken note of some major themes which had

emerged in the consultation process. These included a strong belief by Canadians in the CPP and a strong desire to see the CPP remain a public pension plan rather than privatized.

The real force of the proposed legislative changes can only be understood by penetrating the detailed and rather technical methodology of assessment criteria and calculation of benefits. The Liberals' promise to place a ceiling on contributions to a combined employer-employee rate of 9.9% instead of the forecasted 14.2% is, they say, made possible by the imposition of "moderate" cuts to future CPP benefits. Reminiscent of the technical changes to the calculation of UI benefits, the CPP legislation alters the way the average career earnings figure is reached, which will in many cases reduce future retirees' benefit levels.

The group of women who will suffer most in the current round of CPP cuts are disabled women. Eligibility criteria are already being narrowed and will restrict access to disability pensions. A stronger labour force attachment will be required, and the Minister also announced that the basis for calculating pension amounts has been moved from income at age 65 to income at the time of disablement. It is clear from the federal government document *Securing the Canadian Pension Plan* that this will result in lower pensions (1997, p.15), and that it is seen by government as one of their "moderate" cuts. Another change which will affect disabled women is a change in the formula used to determine pension levels in the case of a woman receiving both disability and survivor benefits. Although technically convoluted, essentially the new rule results in less money for women who are disabled and have survived their spouse.

The Canadian Health and Social Transfer, a block funding arrangement for health and social services and post-secondary education (CHST), illustrates how the corporate agenda is perpetuated by the federal government at the provincial level. In many provinces, and Alberta and Ontario are the clear examples, the massive cut of \$7 billion in federal funding and the removal of national standards incorporated in the CHST adds ammunition and impetus to the premiers' already deep cuts in social

programs.

Even Conservative commentators criticized Harris for cutting too deeply too fast, but Harris could point to his election victory, won on an overtly right wing platform. Even though other provincial governments were not elected on this platform, the corporate agenda is being implemented nevertheless, almost by stealth. For example, the Tobin government in Newfoundland and Labrador won the provincial recent election in 1996 on the basis of "A better tomorrow", and a promise to move away from a single minded cutting of social programs in the name of the deficit.

However, despite this mandate, the Tobin cabinet has continued along the route of government cuts, lay-offs and tax breaks to business instead of any alternative policies for jobs and economic growth. This agenda is in the face of a provincial unemployment rate of 17.4% (Statistics Canada, 1996), real unemployment as high as 90% in many rural areas, and the highest family poverty rate in the country at 18% (Canning, 1996). Different political labels are apparently of little significance; both the Liberal and Conservative parties are pursuing the corporate agenda, some governments more obviously than others.

### **THE CORPORATE AGENDA IN DISGUISE: NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR'S STRATEGIC SOCIAL PLAN**

In the Fall of 1996 the province was involved in a "public dialogue" about the development of a strategic social plan. However, it was apparent from an analysis of the government's consultation paper and especially in the light of their previous cuts in health, education and social services (Newfoundland and Labrador Federation of Labour, 1996, p. 16-30), that people were being asked to participate in the dismantling of their social programs.

Although disguised in a continuing theme of a progressive response to change--in demographics, international competition and "financial reality"--the consultation paper reveals policy shifts which are clearly recognizable as part of the corporate agenda:

the move from collective to individual responsibility, from the universality of social programs to targeted individuals, and from the public to private sector provision of services. The idea of individual responsibility is frequently alluded to in the context of the need to "share the responsibility for maintaining our social system" (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, p 76). Arguing that individuals are responsible for their own misfortunes ignores social causes and leads to a 'blame the victim' mentality, penalizing individuals who have very little control over their circumstances. It is a particularly strong theme in the chapter on social services, where the need to "foster self-reliance and encourage independence" is asserted (p 33). In chapter 10, we read: "The transition from dependence on Government programs will not be easy." (p 69).

This taken-for-granted assumption that people on income security programs become "dependent"--i.e., are no longer individually responsible, passively accepting their lot, not bothering to train or look for jobs aggressively--echoes the underlying assumption of the UI cuts, that if only people made enough effort they would find a job. This position completely ignores the extremely high levels of structural unemployment, especially in Newfoundland and Labrador, and dovetails with the New Right view that, overall, income support programs are a disincentive to work. All indications are that the concept of dependence will be used to justify cuts in social assistance and the introduction of workfare in the province.

Linked to the move towards individualism is the erosion of universality in favour of having to "...reassess existing programs very carefully to identify those areas of services where the need is greatest." (p 75) Integral to an acceptance of the collective responsibility for all citizens' welfare, is the acceptance of the universal right of everyone to good health, welfare, education, jobs, quality of life, and protection from harm. Once we start targeting those "most in need" through means testing or other methods we increase the probability of those in real need falling through the cracks because of narrow (politically influenced) definitions of need, or because of administrative inefficiencies.

International research by Martin (1992) shows that the logic of targeting services at the very poorest is that for everyone else they should be cut back and privatized.

Support for privatization of public services runs through the government's consultation paper. Although not always explicit, it is evident that the government has in mind a range of privatization techniques, including commercialization of services; user-fees; use of vouchers (to enable "choice" and "self-management"); public-private sector partnering; and contracting out services to private organizations, with an emphasis on not-for-profit and voluntary service agencies.

Privatization is known to be inefficient, despite right-wing justifications for it. US spending on health care was more than double the OECD average and 40% higher than in Canada (Schieber and Poullier, 1991; Woolhandler and Himmelstein, 1991). But the US ranks poorly compared to Canada and Europe in infant mortality, maternal mortality and longevity, mainly because so many Americans lack access to proper health care. Whereas the rich have access to top notch health care, some 40 million Americans, 10 million of them children, have no medical insurance (Barlowe and Campbell, 1995; and McQuaig, 1995). Martin (1992) has documented the dire effects of privatisation in Britain.

The consultative paper's deficit budgeting framework and strong theme of the "affordability" of social programs completely undermines the design and implementation of any real policies designed to tackle poverty and unemployment, which the paper acknowledges to be the real problem. On page 3 of the consultation document, the tone is set when the government starts a sub-section called "Good Social Planning" with:

If an adequate level of services is to be maintained in a time of fiscal restraint, the approach to social policy and program development must be altered. Whether in education, social services, health care, or the voluntary sector, **the emphasis has to shift from expansion to streamlining delivery systems.** (Government of Newfoundland

and Labrador, 1996)(emphasis added)

Despite talking about "making choices", it is clear that cuts, privatization and deregulation are the underlying thrust of what the Liberal government in Newfoundland and Labrador want to see in their social plan. This approach undermines any progress towards the community model of health care prominent. This shift from institutional to community care is overlaid with shifts from an emphasis on cure to that of prevention; from sickness to wellness/lifestyle issues. A similar kind of thinking can be detected in the renewed emphasis on children remaining in the family and community rather than being placed in foster care, and children with disabilities attending regular schools. However, cuts in hospitals and nursing homes combined with chronic underfunding of home care makes this community model unworkable. Similarly, cuts to remedial teachers and teachers' assistants undermine any benefits gained by integration of children with special needs in the regular classroom.

### **CUTS, PRIVATIZATION, AND DEREGULATION AS MUTUALLY REINFORCING**

Gaps in social programs tend to be filled by privatized services, an outcome well understood by governments with a free market philosophy. For example, cuts in postsecondary education in Newfoundland and Labrador have caused reduced course offerings and longer waiting lists and now private colleges are springing up across the province.

As the public sector is female dominated, most lay offs caused by the combined effect of government cuts and privatization have already disproportionately affected women. In the period from 1990 to 1995, full-time women workers in the public sector declined by 4% in Canada; taking all public sector jobs lost up to 1995, the sharpest drop was in the female-dominated clerical occupational group. Internal information from the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) reveals that 64% of workers whose jobs will be terminated in the 45,000 job loss announced in the 1995 federal budget are

women from the clerical and the related data processing and administrative support areas. Further, it is women of colour, aboriginal women and women with disabilities who have only recently gained access to work in the public service who are now being disproportionately squeezed out (CLC, 1997).

Women who find themselves having to compete for private service sector jobs because their own work has been contracted out by government will find that the majority of new service jobs in the private sector are non-unionized, under paid, with few or no benefits and protections. In 1984, the public sector was the most highly organized sector (72%), compared to only 36.9% coverage in the service sector (Chaison and Rose, 1989). In 1989, Canadian unionized women workers earned 84% of men's wages (full-time and full-year), while non-unionized women workers earned only 70% of men's wages (White, 1993).

One of the driving forces behind privatization is the achievement of lower employment costs through the shift from unionized to non-unionized work. This plank of the corporate agenda will reinforce the ghettoization of women's work, with many more women earning wages below the poverty line. The home support sector in Newfoundland and Labrador is a good example of this process at work, where home care services previously provided by the state were transferred to private agencies, enabling the government to take advantage of cheap labour for services once carried out by decently paid, unionized public servants. These chronically underfunded agencies could barely survive and only did so by hiring women on poverty wages. When the women organized and went on strike for a collective agreement with fair wages and benefits, the system collapsed. Women in this case suffered a double whammy: they eventually lost their jobs because the private home care agency closed; and they and other women in the area lost what home care services they previously had.

The move away from universality and the introduction of user fees, another aspect of privatization, will also penalize women. When we take into consideration the widening gender wage gap; that we in Canada have the second highest

incidence of low paid employment for women in the world (CLC, 1997) and the worst record (joint with Australia) among the world's industrialized countries in ending child poverty (CLC, 1997); and the extremely high levels of poverty for single-mother families (Ross, Shillington and Lochhead, 1996), it is reasonable to assume that any user fees introduced will make it more difficult for many women and their families to access previously universal services, undermining their health, education and general welfare.

Increasing trends of underemployment and unemployment of women may have serious health as well as economic consequences. Lower income tends to have an indirect negative effect on health; in fact, in their consultative document on a strategic social plan (1996), the government of Newfoundland and Labrador pointed out this link between income and health. Staff shortages as a result of cutbacks will create more pressure on those women left, jeopardizing their health because of higher stress levels and a higher probability of workplace injuries, illness and abuse. In health care, women have experienced outsourcing, de-institutionalization through both hospital closures and faster turnover of acute care patients, downsizing and bed closures, and keeping minimal levels of staff to the sacrifice of quality care. As one nursing home health care aide commented:

There are only two staff taking care of a whole floor of frail, older people and that's an incredible amount of work. The residents have to conform to the schedule of the staff. The care is slipping, but it goes unnoticed. (CLC, 1997, p 11)

Another health care worker spoke forcefully about her working conditions:

My nursing home is hell on earth. You can never feel good about your job because there is so much to do. Workplace injuries, low morale and a stressed-out workforce. It is also an aging workforce. There are so many women who leave to go on long-term

disability. Instead of being able to make it to a retirement pension. With all the lifting and work speed-up, I can see it coming. We are setting ourselves up for permanent disabilities. We are trapped. There is not much opportunity for women in small towns. We go to work with our spirits broken. (CLC, 1997, p 32)

Women's health is also threatened by cuts to research and services in areas unique to them. For example, while listening to the federal government pre-budget consultations in 1996, I heard a Newfoundland and Labrador medical doctor warning the government of the consequences of the cuts in funding for breast cancer research. Hospitals and health centres specifically catering for women are being closed. Examples include the Women's College Hospital in Toronto and the Grace Hospital in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador.

Given that 80% of health care workers are women and virtually all women at some time in their lives need to access the service, women are affected by cuts and privatization in health care in multiple ways. A dramatically increased likelihood of unemployment is paralleled by more stressful if not dangerous work for those that are left, together with a steady decline in the quality of services they can expect when they have to use the health care system, either for their own health problems or for relatives who otherwise would be cared for in hospitals or a nursing home, leading to yet more stress and worry. A vicious circle indeed.

Another dimension of the corporate agenda is the current trend towards the deregulation of employment standards, evident in the majority of provinces where governments are 'reviewing' a wide range of regulatory frameworks, often including health and safety, workers' compensation, labour relations and environment legislation. The political agenda to 'streamline' the regulatory regime to create 'an attractive climate for business' is a recipe for deteriorating standards in the workplace and the environment.

Women, particularly, will lose out in this process since the unique aspects of their health at

work (for example, repetitive strain injuries and stress arising from sexual harassment) are areas already under-researched and under-regulated (CLC, 1997; Newfoundland and Labrador Federation of Labour, 1997). It is now even less likely that any further progress will be made in terms of incorporating these health hazards in the relevant protective legislation. This is especially important since women left at work after lay offs are stretched to the limit, often suffering from what has been called the "survivors' syndrome" --constantly worrying about being next on the lay off lists--and the risk of workplace injuries and illness is increased. As one woman, a letter-carrier, remarked:

We are so overworked and understaffed that women workers are forced out with RSI (repetitive strain injuries). The route gets longer and we're up against the wall. (CLC, 1997, p 32)

#### **POVERTY, EDUCATION, PROTECTION AND JUSTICE**

Increased poverty levels through unemployment and cuts in income security programs, such as UI, social assistance, CPP, and workers' compensation, translates into more struggle for many women--especially young single mothers and senior women--in their attempts to provide basic necessities for themselves and their families. Already we can see that the proportion of families living in poverty increased dramatically from 1989 to 1993: from 10.8% to 14.6%. The poverty rate for single women over 65 rose from 40.1% in 1993 to 44.9% in 1994. Six out of ten lone-parent mothers live in poverty, and among young lone-mothers under 25, 86% are poor (Ross, Shillington and Lochhead, 1996).

Furthermore, despite an all-party resolution by the House of Commons passed in 1989 to eliminate poverty among Canadian children by the year 2000, Canada's ratification of the U.N. standards of special safeguards and care for children, and election promises to tackle child poverty, our country was singled out for criticism by the U.N. in 1995 for its unacceptably high level of poverty, which now blights the lives of about 1.5 million children.

Cuts in all levels of publicly funded education, training and employment services will close off what avenues were available for breaking out of the cycle of poverty experienced by many unemployed and working poor women. Fast disappearing funding for special affirmative action projects will eventually reverse the encouraging trend of more girls going into science and technology, closing doors to better paying occupations. Progressive equity legislation like the Employment Equity Act in Ontario has been repealed and that province's Pay Equity Act has been weakened, increasing the barriers many women face in accessing training, work and fair pay.

Less social and cooperative housing and fewer shelters make it more difficult for women to escape abusive relationships. There is a desperate need for education and training within the justice system to prevent the increasing trend of revictimization of girls who have been sexually abused (see Martin, 1992), combined with a need for more, and more progressive, support and counselling services for the victims of sexual abuse. In the current climate of cutbacks, it is extremely unlikely that these important services will be provided.

Another disturbing element of the current shift to the Right is the evident interest a number of provincial governments take in the privatization of our justice system, combined with a big marketing campaign currently conducted by the US private prison companies. There is a real danger of the adoption of a US style justice system which emphasises incarceration to the virtual exclusion of rehabilitation (Finn, 1996). Already in Newfoundland and Labrador, women have been moved from a rehabilitative, community-based location in Stephenville, with adequate recreational space, to what amounts to a 'warehousing' facility elsewhere in the province. Labour and women's groups have criticized this action, and take it as a clear sign that the provincial government is taking on board a more punitive model of justice, which also fits in very well with the current drive towards cutting costs.

All these examples show how the corporate agenda of removing government allows free reign to market forces, which will exacerbate gender

inequality and reinforce patriarchy both in the home, in the workplace and in many other aspects of our lives.

### **HOW TO FIGHT BACK**

To fight back, women must be very clear about the link between what is happening concurrently in their everyday lives and the provincial, national and international dovetailing of ideologies and policies, espoused by the majority of today's governments and the increasingly powerful corporate sector, especially the big banks and other financial institutions.

Working people, both men and women, have a long history of struggle fighting back against the excesses of patriarchal capitalism. One way in which women can challenge the corporate agenda is through their union or, where this no union protection, they can help to organize their workplace to gain collective strength.

Research into the implementation of pay equity in Ontario and Newfoundland and Labrador during this time period showed that unionized women gained far more than those without a union to fight for them, and identified a strong labour-feminist politic in the unions with the most success in pay equity bargaining. This labour-feminist politic was characterized by the infusion of feminist ideology, process, practices, structure, analysis and action into labour policies and practices, and evolved as a result of feminists working in existing union structures and processes, or from coalition with outside women's groups (Skipton, 1995).

An excellent example of just what women can do through their union is the successful laundry workers' strike in Calgary in November 1995. Predominantly immigrant women and women of colour, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) laundry workers were protesting against the contracting out of their work, despite their earlier 28% wage concession in exchange for saving their jobs. Because of their strike, the employer eventually backed down over contracting out. As one woman said:

Management thought we didn't count. They

got really shocked. They thought we were the minorities, women but also immigrants, they figured we were not intelligent, not smart enough to ask for ourselves. We showed them little people like us can make a difference. They better not underestimate our group any more! (CLC, 1997, p 46)

The fight for decent wages for home care workers in Newfoundland and Labrador is still continuing, with their union, the Newfoundland Association of Public Employees (NAPE), demanding the provincial government accept responsibility as the employer. Also, labour leaders in the province have been instrumental in achieving consensus in a joint task force on labour law on a new provision for imposition of a first collective agreement. If the provincial cabinet accept this recommendation, then small female dominated bargaining units, as in the striking home care workers, will have more power to establish decent wages and working conditions during their first set of negotiations.

Women can also fight back within their unions on a broader, political level. The Canadian Labour Congress, District Labour Councils, the provincial federations of labour and their affiliate unions have been in the forefront of the fight back against the corporate agenda. They have organized campaigns to fight back against government's erosion of our social programs, including UI, medicare, pensions, education and against the introduction of the CHST. Many of the labour federations and councils, and individual unions, submitted briefs during government consultations. Since the late eighties labour has focused on building alliances with social and community activists, and have encouraged organizing at the local, grassroots level. The Days of Action in Ontario were spearheaded by the Ontario Federation of Labour and the Ontario Coalition for Social Justice, an umbrella coalition of community based organizations.

For me, one of the most exciting and empowering fight-back campaigns was the Women's March Against Poverty in May and June 1996, a powerful alliance of the labour movement and women's groups, joined by social justice, community

and church groups. Co-sponsored by the Canadian Labour Congress and the National Action Committee on the Status of Women, women from diverse backgrounds all worked together to confront the corporate agenda by travelling across Canada in two caravans and marching together in protest in Ottawa on June 15.

An extract from the CLC report on women's work captures the feeling of that rally on Parliament Hill on a hot sunny day, and it sums up the optimism and hope generated by the sight of so many women making themselves heard in strong condemnation of the corporate agenda and its effect on women:

Led by a strong contingent of aboriginal sisters, over 40,000 women from across the country marched to the sounds of drumming, chanting and singing. There

were busloads of young women and a large presence of women with disabilities. Immigrant women and women of colour marched under different community and union banners. Anti-poverty activists, lesbians, child care workers and activists both young and old were all represented. The diversity represented in the March was truly amazing and it reflected the joint leadership of labour and the women's movement. One couldn't have done it without the other. (1997, p 50)

Above all, women must fight against the idea that cuts, privatization and deregulation are inevitable. This means organizing, analyzing, strategizing, and publicizing alternative policies, and identifying the corporate agenda for what it is. Also coalitions must be built between labour, women's groups and other activists to build up enough power so that governments will have to listen.

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