

Book Reviews

Getting Organized: Building a Union. Mary Cornish and Laurell Ritchie. Toronto: *The Women's Press*, 1980, pp. 224.

Women and Unions. Julie White. Ottawa: *The Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women*, 1980, pp. 131.

In the early months of the summer of 1980, a small group of women in rural Nova Scotia took on one of the largest corporations in Atlantic Canada. The women, who worked in a seasonal lobster and crab processing plant in Lismore, N.S., which is owned by H.B. Nickerson Ltd., decided it was time to unionize. The union drive was successful; enough union cards were signed to warrant a certification vote under the Nova Scotia Trade Union Act. Management was astounded. Initially, there had been little opposition to the union attempt simply because it was assumed that the women could not possibly succeed. However, once it appeared that certification was a certainty, the anti-union campaign began.

Immediately lobster and crab production quotas were increased; union supporters were transferred from job to job within the plant. An uneven system of justice was established with one set of laws for union supporters and another for those who opposed certification. A union supporter was fired for eating a crab leg; an anti-union employee was reprimanded for stealing a large salmon. To use the washrooms at times other than lunch or coffee breaks, female employees had to raise their hand and ask permission. Management pulled out all the stops to impress upon the workers that a union

would not improve the working conditions of the women and men at this fish plant.

The women encountered the anti-union tactics with great ingenuity and humour. But they were at a loss on how to deal with some of the arbitrary policies and the terrific changes in working conditions. The business agent from the union they were joining told them that they could not launch grievances, because they had not negotiated a contract. Finally, a Halifax labour lawyer informed the women that there was a course of action against Nickerson's under the unfair labour practices of the trade union act. Had the organizing committee had a copy of *Getting Organized: Building A Union* they may have been able to deal more effectively and easily with the hurdles and general opposition imposed by management, as well as avoid unnecessary hassles from the union.

Mary Cornish and Laurell Ritchie's *Getting Organized: Building A Union* and Julie White's *Women and Unions* are both timely and important publications for Canadian women. During the 1970's it has been estimated that for every one man who signed a union card, there were at least three women. In Nova Scotia, female trade union membership tripled between 1969 and 1978. But, most employed women in Nova Scotia and Canada still remain unorganized and without the protection of a collective agreement. Nova Scotia women have the lowest degree of unionization in Canada. (White, Table 4) The tactics used by employers, such as H.B. Nickerson, the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce, Fleck Manufacturing Ltd., Michelin Tire Ltd., to name a few, have been effective in intimidating workers and crushing unionization drives. *Women and Unions* and *Getting Organized: Building A Union* are useful in understanding the underrepresentation of women in unions and developing strategies to change the situation.

In *Women and Unions* Julie White attempts to provide an overall assessment of the status of women within the Canadian labour movement and an analysis of the ways women have gained equality through unionization. She examines the historical relationship that has existed between women and unions and the factors that have prevented unionization, such as the nature of women's work, job fragmentation, changing labour market conditions and employer opposition. She could also add government opposition to her list. Through case studies, literature review and statistical analysis, White also examines the gains that women have made through unionization—equal pay, maternity leave, benefits for part-time workers, leave for family illness and union activity. There is still much to be done in winning equality, although, as White argues a start has been made. During the past year or so, a number of significant gains have been made by working women through the negotiation of personal discrimination clauses which provide protection against sexual harassment and having to perform personal favours for employers, from shopping for spouses to getting coffee (York University Staff Association). And of course, 1981 was the year that the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW), whose membership is 40% female, went out on strike over the issue of 17 weeks paid maternity leave.

One of the most insightful and useful parts of White's *Women and Unions* is the three case studies—negotiating a first contract (Fleck Strike); equal pay for work of equal value (CUPE and the Winnipeg Health Services Centre) and winning 20 weeks paid maternity leave (the Common Front in Quebec). The studies graphically illustrate the opposition working women face in the struggle for equality, as well as the length of time gains can take. The Fleck strike and the struggle for equal pay for work of equal value in Winnipeg

resulted in considerable state intervention against the women. At Fleck over \$2 million was spent by the Ontario government in providing police protection against the 75 striking women. At the Winnipeg Health Services Centre CUPE and management developed a job evaluation plan which provided for equal pay for work of equal value for 936 women. The agreement cost an additional 11% to the overall wage settlement over a two year period. However, the time was 1976 during wage and price controls. The Anti-Inflation Board (AIB) turned down the agreement, although there was a provision for wage compensation to eliminate sex discrimination. It would take another two years and another round of negotiations to win the 1976 agreement which had been rolled back by the AIB. The Common Front struggle to win paid maternity leave for Quebec public sector workers illustrates the strategies required and the time it can take to win feminist issues. In 1979 the Common Front won 20 weeks paid maternity leave at full wage—one of the best agreements to date. However, it took seven years of tactical planning and negotiating to achieve.

White is optimistic about the relationship between women and unions. She successfully argues that the trade union movement represents an important strategy for working women to gain better wages and benefits, safer and healthier working conditions, as well as some control over their workplaces. Unionization also is critical to winning feminist issues such as paid maternity leave, equal pay for work of equal value and child care provisions. However, I think, White overlooks and fails to examine the battles that many women within unions must fight in order to gain equality.

Part of White's optimism about the future of women and unions comes out of her analysis of the feminist victories. Little attention is given

to the failures of some labour organizations to organize women. Because *Women and Unions* is essentially an overview of the Canadian situation, it does not examine the particular conditions of women and unions in regions dominated by marginal industries and labour surpluses. For example, many unions in Nova Scotia are in a defensive, if not critical, situation, because of economic factors, internal difficulties and the role of the government in undermining unionism. Consequently, feminist issues have made few gains. Women's committees are still in their infancy and their composition reflects tokenism, union politics and the absence of a developed constituency for feminist issues.

Union organizers and business agents are faced with serving a large number of locals scattered throughout the Maritime region. They often have little time or energy to develop strong equality education programs as well as provide the other services. They are reluctant to organize or accept additional locals that will further stretch their limited resources. Consequently, working women, eager to join established unions are left to form independent organizations which are not affiliated with the larger, more powerful central labour bodies.

The Lismore women essentially worked on their own to unionize. The Canadian Seafood Workers Union saw problems in successfully negotiating a contract in a seasonal fish plant which was marginal to the Nickerson operation and so, were initially reluctant to get involved. The reality of the everyday lives of women dependent on seasonal operations of fish plants and other marginal industries in under-developed regions, combined with a weak provincial trade union movement, does not readily lead to optimism. However, *Women and Unions* is a place to begin; it provides a framework for examining the status of women within local and regional unions and labour organizations.

Regional studies are a necessary complement to understanding the failures and the successes of women in unions, and so, to the development of effective strategies for winning equality.

Getting Organized: Building a Union is essentially a "how to" manual, which is obviously desperately needed. Although *Getting Organized* began as a project of the Ontario Law Union, and is based on the province's labour legislation and traditions, the information and framework of action can be adapted to other jurisdictions. Laurell Ritchie, an organizer for the Canadian Textile and Chemical Union, an affiliate of the Canadian Confederation of Unions (CCU), and Mary Cornish, a feminist lawyer, specializing in labour law, follow the procedure of organizing a union from the moment the decision to organize has been taken through to the first contract negotiations. They examine the factors that should be taken into consideration in the decision as to which union to join; the ways and means of organizing a campaign, coping with employer opposition, deciding on a bargaining unit, as well as procedures for applying to the labour board for certification. Each stage in the certification process is described in a clear straight forward manner with tips on how to deal with hearings, examinations and certification votes.

Presenting labour law in a clear, straightforward manner is not a particularly easy task. The procedures and decision-making processes of provincial and federal labour boards have become exceedingly bureaucratic and complex. Ironically, the laws that established labour relation boards were initially welcomed by trade unionists as progressive measures which would serve to secure the recognition of labour organizations and the bargaining process. However, Cornish and Ritchie argue that these laws are being used more and more to prevent or discourage unionization. Em-

ployers determined to resist unionization have effectively used the labour relations boards to delay certification votes and to price the procedure far beyond the financial means of some unions.

Getting Organized: Building A Union recognizes the dynamics of labour politics and the way certain issues can be bargained away. As Julie White notes, more and more unions and labour centrals are issuing policy statements about the status of women and feminist issues. But, policy statements and contract negotiations behind closed doors can be two very different things. Cornish and Ritchie examine a number of strategies that women can use to guarantee equality, and not simply tokenism.

A large part of our everyday lives is spent working, preparing for or organizing around work. However, a great many women in Canada do not have full dignity at the workplace and must settle for less than decent wages and working conditions. The women at the Lismore fish plant were faced with minimum wages and unhealthy working conditions. They had no paid sick leave, no private pension and absolutely no control over their individual production levels. Unionization was critical in their struggle to gain dignity. *Getting Organized: Building A Union* is an important text for working women looking for dignity and equality in the workplace. Julie White's *Women and Unions* is also an important place to begin in gaining an overview of where women are in unions and what can be won. But much work remains to be done. Local and regional studies, both historical and contemporary analyses, are required to develop effective organizing and bargaining strategies for full equality and dignity in the workplace and the union.

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Sara Jeannette Duncan: Novelist of Empire.
Thomas E. Tausky. *Port Credit: P.D. Meany, 1980. Pp. 300.*

Despite a growing interest in Canadian literature these past ten years, we have been slow to follow up on the pioneer work of such critics as Carl F. Klinck, Reginald E. Watters and Malcolm Ross, who have rescued many of our earlier writers from obscurity. It seems easier to write yet another article on one of our current popular writers than to search through archives and libraries for manuscripts, out-of-print works, and early periodicals. And, surprisingly, despite the current strong interest in women writers and the recognition that many earlier women merit reassessment, feminist critics have not risen to the occasion. A major exception is Clara Thomas with her excellent study of Anna Jameson and articles on Catherine Parr Traill, Susanna Moodie, Sara Jeannette Duncan and Martha Ostenso, to name a few. All the more reason to welcome Thomas E. Tausky's full-length study of Sara Jeannette Duncan, a woman we all recognize as meriting serious attention.

In *Sara Jeannette Duncan: Novelist of Empire*, Tausky studies Duncan's fiction and journalism and gives a brief account of her life. Duncan was one of the most prolific as well as one of the most talented Canadian writers of her day. Although determined from youth to be a writer, she attended Toronto Normal School and taught for a brief period in her home town of Brantford before her first opportunity for a writing career arrived. In 1884 she sought out newspaper commissions to cover the New Orleans Cotton Centennial and sent back dispatches to the London (Ontario) *Advertiser* and the Toronto *Globe*. From then on her journalistic career forms a remarkable success story. On her return from New Orleans