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## UNION WORKLOAD: A BARRIER TO WOMEN SURVIVING LABOUR-MOVEMENT LEADERSHIP

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**W**orkaholism is deeply rooted in labour-movement culture. While unions have successfully fought to reduce the work day and week for members, these same unions demand long hours of work from their leaders. These workload expectations assume that union leaders—elected, hired, and volunteer—are men who are always available and have no competing responsibilities or interests. For those who do not fit this male-leader model, becoming and remaining a leader in the union movement is impossible or onerous (Stinson and Richmond 1993; Gray 1993; Ng 1995; Franzway 1997; Sudano 1997).

Women are underrepresented in Canadian union leadership (Boehm 1991; White 1993; CLC 1997 & 1999; Davidson 1998), a fact many connect to the gendered organization of union work (Cunnison & Stageman 1993; Acker 1995; Elton 1997; Franzway 2000; Muir 2000) I interviewed eleven Canadian women in union leadership roles to learn about their experience with union workload. These women were of a range of ages; races; marital and family statuses; from a mixture of private- and public-sector unions and central labour bodies; and in a range of positions in the union hierarchy: shop-floor leader (such as steward), staff, and elected officer.

While only a small number of women were interviewed, their experiences confirm, and expand upon, what others have identified as the nature and effects of union workload in Canada and elsewhere (Cockburn 1991; Roby & Uttal 1993; Needleman 1993; Rooks 2002). The lack of official recognition of the problem, to say nothing of the lack of concrete strategies to address overwork, continues the exclusion of women and other workers from union-movement leadership.

### SOMETHING'S GOTTA GIVE

Six of the eleven women are full-time union staff or full-time elected officers and work an average of 50-60 hours a week<sup>2</sup>. The five shop-floor leaders report union work of between two to seven hours a week, in addition to their paid jobs.

The experience of the women interviewed confirms much of the critique of union workload in the existing literature: long hours result in health problems,

stress, guilt at not performing either their family or union roles to the extent expected, and little time for a personal life and relationships (Cockburn 1991; Roby & Uttal 1993; Needleman 1993; Rooks 2002).

Workload is more manageable the older and more independent their children were, if they had no children at all, and if their partner planned and did at least half of the housework. This would confirm other findings (Andiappan & Chaison 1983; Edelson 1987; CLC 1998; Rooks 2002) that women's primary responsibility for home and family work is a barrier to their involvement in union leadership. It also points out that it is not merely gender that creates the time-squeeze, but a combination of gender and particular social roles, especially the role of mother of young children.

While we might expect to find that union women must curtail their volunteer activities in the community, the interviews also revealed that the volunteer work that remains is, in many cases, another form of union work, albeit unpaid and unacknowledged.

Several of the women explained that they have had to limit or eliminate community involvement in order to meet the demands of union and family life.

*I've had to choose. There's not enough hours in a day to do it all. So I've chosen to not go on some of the boards I was on. (Pearl, 40s, young and older children, shop-floor leader)*

Another woman notes the irony of unions' political commitment to build community on the one hand, and on the other, the fact that the high demands placed on union leaders leave them with no time or energy to act out that commitment.

But for many union women, the volunteer work that remained was often more, unpaid union work. Four of the women were involved in community activities closely tied to or growing out of their union work. For others, unions' expectation that there is no limit to workload prevents them from "switching off" even when they want to be involved in community activism for personal reasons:

*We work in a political organization. People want you to always be wearing that hat no matter what space you're in. So for instance, I go to this teach-in this weekend and... I'm standing up there representing myself through unpaid work as an activist. But they're going to choose to put the hat on me with or without that kind of decision. (Nikki, 24, no children, staff)*

The literature (Eaton 1993; Edelson 1994; Sudano 1997) documents how union workload causes women to quit leadership roles, and six interview participants reported having seriously contemplated quitting. For some, these

“reflection points” came as the result of a single, sometimes calamitous, event in their personal family lives. Joan pulled out of union work completely for a time because of the stress of dealing with a demanding member:

*He called me at home constantly. I had to quit or go crazy... So I quit for a year. I said, “This is enough – these people are getting way too close to my life.” (Joan, 36, young child, shop-floor leader)*

Pearl went through a period of a few years when she felt she had no time to herself as she moved from meeting to meeting:

*I think it actually was something my daughter said... “Well, you’re never home anyway.” It was just a passing comment like that, but she’s a teenager, and it was, like, “Gee, I’ve got to get a grip on this or I’m going to lose her.” (Pearl, 40s, young and older children, shop-floor leader)*

For others, it was simply the dawning realization of how little personal life they had.

## **FIT IN OR QUIT**

Unions’ expectations are extremely high, particularly of staff and high-level elected officers, but of shop-floor leaders, too:

*People will say that you shouldn’t work overtime. Yet they expect that all of this gets done. So words don’t necessarily translate into what the real expectations are: whatever it takes. (Ann, 49, older children, elected leader)*

*I think it’s endless. It seems like your job is never finished or your [activist] work is never finished. You’re always expected to be on top of it all. (Pearl, 40s, young and older children, shop-floor leader)*

Two of the three lower-level shop-floor leaders reported receiving no criticism for the amount of work they did, but there was insufficient information to identify why their experience differs from their sisters’.

Good performance is measured by visible presence in the office or at meetings, not through other, less time-dependent measures:

*[T]he more you do, the more respect you get. I’ve learned that. (Nisha, 26, young child, shop-floor leader)*

*[I]f I were incredibly efficient and for whatever reason was regularly able to get everything done perfectly and have all my units winning big victories in 20 hours a*

*week, I honestly think that people would be suspicious of that somehow. It's not the outcome so much. There is sort of an hours-logged, kilometers-driven measurement stick, which is pretty pathetic, really. (Maria, 50, no children, staff)*

Part of the endless-expectations-culture is the notion that union staff or elected leaders are second-rate if they waver:

*[T]here's huge amounts of stress with our staff. And some people end up on stress leave and then it's almost again that the union as employer or the political structures of that union say, "Well, you've burned out so I guess we have to take you back but we won't have very high expectations of you." (Eva, 52, no children, elected leader)*

Most of the women interviewed (seven) experienced difficulty fitting in the male-leader model:

*[W]hen my son was still nursing, I didn't go to a conference that was a four-and-a-half-hour drive, because I didn't want to drive alone with an infant just to be a warm body at a conference. So I made that unilateral decision and was quite strongly spoken to about it [by my supervisor]. (Fatima, 40, young child, staff)*

*No one has ever said, "You must work till you puke," but it's behaviour that's modeled and I was pretty aware of that from the first day I started the job. The rhetoric around how tired everyone was, and people talk about how many kilometers they've driven or how many meetings they had, and it's ostensibly for the purpose of saying, "This is crazy, we shouldn't be doing this," but in fact it's presented almost as a sort of badge of honour. And so the stakes become not who's the healthiest but who's knocked themselves out the most in the worst way this week. (Maria, 50, no children, staff)*

The women leaders in my sample who experienced such difficulty were, for the most part, also union staff and/or the women who work the longest hours.

Three of the interview participants did not report difficulty in integrating union work and other priorities. What these women had in common was that they worked the fewest union hours per week, held lower-level positions (steward, president of a small local, committee member), and were also among the youngest and the newest to labour leadership, with an average of just under seven years of involvement, compared to the overall average of fourteen.

But just because a woman experienced difficulty in combining union work with other life priorities does not mean that she challenged or opposed the current construction of union work as long-hours, always-on-call work. In fact, within this interview group, no discernible connection appeared between the hours a woman leader worked and her attitude to the male-leader model.

Two of the women interviewed voiced acceptance of the male-leader model of union work:

*I always say, "Union work is not for wusses." And I don't mean that in a negative way. It's just you require a great deal of physical, mental, and emotional stamina in order to do the job... [Elected officers] can have the greatest contribution and all of that to make, they're missed when they leave, but it's either physically or emotionally maybe, they just don't have the strength to fulfill the job. (Ann, 49, older children, elected leader)*

While noting that it had been challenging for her to raise a small child and spend the family time that her husband would like, Bella still said that union work was:

*[N]ot just a nine-to-five window, it's a passion, a devotion, it's something that we live, not just do. (Bella, 39, young child, shop-floor leader)*

Most others criticized aspects of the male-leader model but still took on the role. In other words, they did not like the rules of the game, but they wanted to win it, for the sake of women as a group or for personal satisfaction. Dawn had made many adjustments in order to be a union staff person while raising a young family, such as giving up on sleep. She described the pressure she felt to:

*[P]erform as a professional... meaning that you can't let your family get in the way... [W]hen I was younger in my career, [I] felt a serious obligation to not even have those things enter the workplace, not have them enter my discussions with either my colleagues or the people I deal with or the people I represent... I was the only woman in the office. There was a big pressure on me personally for being a woman coming in there, because we hadn't had many. (Dawn, 40, young children, staff)*

The construction of union work as men's work is clear in her words, and clearly was intended as a barrier to keep women out of the job of union staff person:

*I started off as a single parent working there, and my boss would just go out of the blue, "You've got to go to [another city] tonight." And, well, I, I couldn't, unless I'm dragging my baby with me and you can't exactly leave a six-month child with just anybody, particularly because she was breast-feeding. And I just felt quite defeated a lot, and very alone. But I was quite determined that women could do it, because as a member of this organization, I had been a proponent of getting women hired and getting more women involved in our union. So I couldn't let down my guard. (Dawn, 40, young children, staff)*

“Beating the men at their own game” appears to many women to be the only strategy available to overturn the male standard of union leader and win a place in the movement. The fact that women who challenge the system may, in fact, reproduce many of its characteristics indicates how deeply rooted workaholicism is in the labour movement and what creativity and determination are needed to eradicate it.

## UNION RESPONSES TO UNION WORKLOAD

When the interview participants discussed how their unions accommodated the clash of union and personal priorities, it was clear that any measures were ad-hoc, not systemic, and designed to respond to crises, rather than prevent them:

*[If] you have a nervous breakdown, or if you have a drinking problem, there's the EFAP (Employee and Family Assistance Program). It seems that it's not until you've reached that critical crisis breaking point; the supports along the way aren't there. In fact, we don't even have any references to sick leave for family members in our collective agreement. There are no allowances or policies around that. (Fatima, 40, young child, staff)*

Nisha's experience was that unions were not supportive of activists with families, and she was reluctant to use child care at union events because of the unsupportive context.

*[The other union members at the events would] be like, "What are you doing?" You just know that it's still not really in the culture. You know, you don't see people at convention with their kids running around and you don't see people in conferences with their kids running around... I couldn't find anywhere to fit my child into my union work. (Nisha, 26, young child, shop-floor leader)*

There was no evidence of widespread, systemic policies within unions to help leaders balance work and family/personal lives. Other elected officers and grassroots union members were reported to be more supportive of measures to restrict union work than were staff. Women union staff found little support from their colleagues:

*Just the other day, my shop steward asked me if I had concerns that I wanted to raise, and when I started to talk about the excessive work on weekends, he interrupted me to tell me that he's worked so many weekends from January to March that his [earned days off] wouldn't compensate him for the time. I didn't get to say another word. Meanwhile, he has a wife at home taking care of things and I'm a single parent. (Fatima, 40, young child, staff)*

## CONCLUSION

The women who shared their stories were still in union leadership roles at the time of the interviews. Despite the price they pay – the stress, the lost time with family, the put-downs – they were hanging in there. But think about the women – and others – who are no longer contributing in leadership roles or who never will share their perspectives and skills with the labour movement. Think about who *isn't* in leadership because they can't compromise their personal life or won't give up on their role in the community. That loss of potential skill and community connection is the price the labour movement pays for its workaholism.

Such a loss need not be perpetual. Unions could decide to recognize union workload as a barrier to inclusive leadership and adopt measures to systematically change the construction and organization of union work and of union leadership. These measures could include limits on daily and weekly hours of work for union staff, limits on terms of office and job-sharing for elected officers, and union campaigns challenging the unequal division of home/family work in heterosexual households<sup>3</sup> For example, there is no evidence now that the labour movement has recognized the phenomenon of crisis-induced “reflection points”, although it must be a common subject of hallway and after-hours conversations. These would be some of the points when the movement loses women leaders. Unions could develop policies to prevent these points from occurring or at least to help women through them. At the moment, women leaders are left to make it through on their own.

At the moment, all union leaders are expected to sink or swim on their own. Whether in terms of job training, upgrading, workload management, emotional and physical health, or community connections, it's all up to the individual, except in rare cases. But such an ad-hoc, individualistic approach is unsuitable for a movement whose intention is to have representative leadership and to humanize working life. Involving more women in sustainable forms of union leadership requires a deliberate rethinking and restructuring of union workload and union leadership.

## NOTES

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<sup>2</sup> This is in keeping with the hours reported in studies by Watson (1998), Stinson and Richmond (1993), Edelson (1994), and Davidson (1998).

<sup>3</sup> For some suggestions, see Chapter 5 of Paavo (2003), *Eight Days a Week: How Union Workload Blocks Women's Leadership in the Union Movement*, Department of Sociology and Equity Studies in Education, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Toronto, University of Toronto or a condensed version in an article of the same name in *Our Times* (April/May 2004).

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