

---

**AFFIRMATIVE ACTION  
POSITIONS FOR WOMEN ON  
THE CANADIAN LABOUR  
CONGRESS EXECUTIVE:  
COMMENTS TO THE  
ADVANCING THE EQUITY  
AGENDA CONFERENCE**

*Nancy Riche*

Secretary-Treasurer (Retired),  
Canadian Labour Congress (CLC),  
St. John's, Newfoundland, Canada

---

In 1984, I was in St. John's and we heard the story of what happened with the proposed affirmative action seats for women on the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) Executive, within hours of it being decided at the Executive Council. At that time I was Vice-President of the Federation of Labour and doing all sorts of things in the labour movement there.

The CLC women's committee had put forward a recommendation to study, over the next two years, the idea of adding six extra seats to the CLC Executive to increase the representation of women there. Dennis McDermott, then President of the CLC said, "Why would we do that? Why don't we just do it now?" Six extra seats were added

*We went at it not knowing what we were doing half the time. We had a few instincts but we were like bulls in a china shop.*

immediately and the women claimed victory.

But not having the two years to prepare meant there were no terms of reference, no mandate, nothing. In fact, it was the affiliates who decided how it would be done, who it would be - in short, everything. There was no women's discussion.

So, the leaders divided the country. The National Union of Public and General Employees (NUPGE) got the West. Steel got the East. The Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) and the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) got Ontario. The United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) got Quebec. It changed the geography, but it did not change who decided who got the seats. It was affiliate-driven.

So, when the women came to the CLC Executive council in the beginning it was very clear for a while that they voted no other way except the way their affiliate voted.

But that changed - the women changed. We had a women's conference on violence against women and put the men in their own workshop. And it blew. A number of women decided they would go in with the men and stand shoulder to shoulder with the men.

At the end of the conference, in the plenary, one of the women from that group stood up and

wanted to talk about this. Well, you can imagine... I was so angry that they would now try to hijack this women's conference on this issue. So I said, "It's not going to happen. We're not allowing five percent of the delegates here to disrupt. We've got bigger issues: women are making sixty-fucking-five cents an hour while men are making..."

Well, the Secretary Treasurer of the Canadian Brotherhood of Railway and Transportation (CBRT) workers wrote a big letter about my swearing and kept demanding a response. This was the issue at the CLC in the mid-eighties - Nancy's swearing at the CLC women's conference.

I said, "When you apologize I'll write you back." Now, I can say this with great humour, but I've got to tell you, I was frightened to death.

There were letters upon letters condemning us for what we did and a beautiful support letter from Grace Hartman, then president of CUPE.

Well, it was coming to the CLC Executive Council. So, I went in to explain to the officers that this was coming up. Not one of the three supported me. So, I was going into Executive Council totally alone facing this... whatever they were accusing us of doing.

What a debate. I might cry at this. If there was ever a moment when the affirmative action seats were pivotal to the future of the

labour movement it was that day. There wasn't one of those six women who looked to their President to see what to say. There wasn't one who didn't speak.

The result from that discussion was: "What's going on here". It's the women's committee who decides what happens in a women's conference. We

actually walked out of that meeting with more power than the women's committee ever had in the entire history of the CLC.

It was pivotal and fundamental to understand how good the affirmative action seats can work. Because, there was a concern, up until that time, that it was basically just what the affiliates wanted.

*I think it's time now to think of outrageous acts and everyday rebellions.*