

## STILL THE MOST DIFFICULT REVOLUTION? - A REPORT ON A CONFERENCE ON WOMEN AND UNIONS HELD AT CORNELL UNIVERSITY, (NOV 2003) IN HONOUR OF ALICE H. COOK'S 100<sup>th</sup> BIRTHDAY

*Linda Briskin*

Social Science Division/School of Women's Studies, York University,  
Toronto, Canada

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"Alice Hanson Cook (1903-1998) devoted her life to helping working people, and especially working women, on four continents. What she herself called her 'patchwork career' included social work, adult education, labor organizing, a tour of foreign service at the end of World War II, twenty years teaching in Cornell's School of Industrial and Labor Relations, and authoring numerous books and articles, including The Most Difficult Revolution: Women and Trade Unions (with Val Lorwin and Arlene Kaplan Daniels, 1992) and Women and Trade Unions in Eleven Industrialized Countries (with Lorwin and Daniels, 1984). She was a pioneer in bringing attention to issues such as comparable worth, maternity leave, and pay equity, known for both her scholarly writings and her activism on the experiences of working women around the world." For more information about Cook, go to ([www.ilr.cornell.edu/aliceCook100th](http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/aliceCook100th)).

Alice Cook would have been pleased. The conference held at Cornell University in her honour on what would have been her 100th birthday brought together several hundred (mostly) women from around the world committed to building unions as a vehicle for working women. Like Cook's ground-breaking collection on Women and Trade Unions in Eleven Industrialized Countries (1984) in which the power of comparative research was well demonstrated, the conference agenda included presentations from Australia, the Philippines, Central America, India, Brazil, Korea, Slovenia, Italy, Argentina, Russia, and of course the United States. The lack of inclusion of Canada which has a union movement considerably stronger than many, and a commitment to diversity perhaps unparalleled was a telling oversight which may reflect American attitudes to its northern neighbour.

Listening to the array of papers underscored the significance of continuity, on the one hand, and context, that is, historical and geographic particularity, on the other.

## UNDER-REPRESENTATION IN UNIONS

Almost without exception and regardless of context, the papers confirmed the continuing under-representation of women in union leadership and the persistent barriers to participation. But there have also been some victories. Nair Goulart from Brazil recounted the struggle for what is now a 30% quota in union leadership at some but not all levels of the union movement. Australia also has some quotas for union leadership. In the year 2000, the Australian Confederation of Trade Unions [ACTU] made world union history with a new executive of fifty percent women. In Canada, union centrals like the Canadian Labour Congress, and many provincial union federations have designated or added seats for women (and sometimes for those from other equity seeking groups such as racial minorities, people with disabilities and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered communities). However, women continue to be seriously under-represented in leadership positions in many if not most unions.

Although increased representation is important, I think reducing the struggle for representation to the numbers in top leadership positions is problematic. The focus on top leadership can hide the local and informal leadership by women, thereby exacerbating women's low status in unions, and reproducing traditional patterns of organization and male domination (Briskin, 1999). Furthermore, it can make invisible the importance of constituency organizing as *a form of leadership*.

If one considers impacts rather than numbers, then it could be argued that constituency organizing is a form of leadership, and may be more effective than representation as a vehicle for union transformation (Briskin, forthcoming). For example, calls for reconfiguring the gender order in Canadian unions originally came, not from those in leadership, but from rank and file women with very little credibility, organizing on the margins of unions. They put pressure on unions to take up women's issues and address organizational concerns about inclusivity, democracy and representation. Over the last quarter century, unions have responded to these demands by allocating staff and union resources to equity organizing, changing union policies and practices, expanding the collective bargaining agenda, etc.

## SEPARATE AND SELF ORGANIZING

Another thematic commonality in conference papers related to separate and self-organizing of women both inside unions, and from the outside to pressure unions or provide an alternative to them. For example, Jinock Lee pointed out that, in Korea, in response to a dramatic decline in union density for women, a result of a shift in the economy from female dominated light industry

to male dominated heavy-chemical industry, three different Korean women's unions were established in 1999.

The Korean example provides an interesting contrast to North America where the economy is shifting away from manufacturing and toward the service sector, what some see as a feminization of the labour market. This process is changing the gender demographics in unions in the opposite direction: increasingly women represent a larger percentage of those newly unionized and an increasing share of union membership.

Mylene Hega from the Philippines talked about *makalaya* (Filipino word for 'to be free'), a women's solidarity network whose main goal is to enhance community-union connections. It is premised on the imperative that unionism must adapt to the new realities of the labour market: shrinking formal employment, diminishing role of formal unions and collective bargaining, and the need for worker protection in contingent employment. Indeed, woven through all the presentations was a recognition of the impact of economic restructuring and globalization on women's work and union strength. Unfortunately, the conference was not structured to facilitate talk across these geographies. A panel on the possibilities and practices of transnational organizing might have turned our attention toward the strategic potential of the current context.

## **SOCIAL, COMMUNITY AND SOCIAL MOVEMENT UNIONISM**

One of the sessions was devoted to innovative community-based organizations which have emerged from the need for collective action and in response to the seeming indifference or hostility of unions to the concerns of women and other marginalized constituencies. Kelley Ready described the multiple organizations in Central America which have attempted to improve the labour rights of women working in export processing factories, organizing in the often-treacherous context where unions have been kept out of the *maquilas* through government regulation and violence. Other presentations talked about the National Mobilization against Sweatshops, the Chinese Staff and Workers' Association in New York City, and the Self-Employed Women's Association [SEWA] in India.

In her discussion of the Central de Trabajadores Argentinos [CTA], Laura Chrabolowsky pointed to the crisis of representation for the people who used to define themselves as workers and the potential of social movement unionism to include all regardless of employment status. A discussion across geographies might have helped to clarify the meaning of and inter-relation among social unionism, social movement unionism and community unionism. This language was widely used at the conference, although it is likely that there are considerable differences in understanding precisely what these terms mean, and

the relation between and among them.

Undoubtedly such meanings are shaped by the strength and shape of the labour movement, by geography and by historical, political and economic context. So it may be that in the U.S., community initiatives grow up because of a weak labour movement; in fact, Bronfenbrenner (2003) notes that the NLRB is no longer the primary vehicle through which workers organize in the U.S. today. In Canada, it is worth distinguishing social unionism from community and social movement unionism. The former has often been used to talk about broadening the issues addressed by unions, and democratizing the practices of unions. The latter resonates with notions of new alliances which include the unemployed and precariously employed as well as other social movements. In "Community Unionism: Organising for Fair Employment in Canada", Cranford and Ladd (2003) include under that rubric the efforts of unions to connect with non-labour community groups to unionize workers, so community-union alliances; attempts by community groups to organize non-unionized workers in precarious employment; and organizations which build the power of non-unionized workers and the working class community, for example, Workers' Centres which create broad solidarities through education, networking and organising. Undoubtedly, globalization and economic restructuring are making new forms of unionism both necessary and possible.

## **SIGNIFICANCE OF GENDER-RACE INTERSECTION**

Despite the particularities of geography, context, and history, what was undeniably demonstrated is that gender is always significant to understanding work, globalization, unions, and to developing effective strategies. However, in both theorizing gender and developing organizing strategies, there is a continuing struggle about how to understand and represent the intersection of gender, racialization and class. Two of the conference papers presented data which demonstrates the particular significance of the gender-race intersection in the politics of the workplace in the U.S. Kate Bronfenbrenner pointed out that regardless of industry, company characteristics, or the employer or union campaign, unions have their greatest success in units where women and/or workers of colour predominate. Between 1985 and 2002 the proportion of union members who are white women increased by 14 per cent; and the proportion of women of colour increased by as much as 38 percent. Elections won by unions are often in workplaces with race and gender homogeneity. Bronfenbrenner noted that the lower win rates in mixed units appear to be a consequence of the employers' ability to capitalize on racial or gender divisions in order to undermine the union campaign. She concluded that the great organizing potential is in the service, financial and retail sectors, all dominated by women, and also less vulnerable to global capital mobility than more heavily unionized

manufacturing industries.

In some interesting although preliminary research, Patricia Simpson and Michelle Kaminski showed that African American women are the most likely to focus on interactional rather than distributive or procedural justice<sup>1</sup>. They concluded that not only do minority women seem to value interactional justice more than white women and males, but they also seem to value interactional justice over either of the other two organizational justice dimensions.

One could hypothesise a relationship between the findings of Bronfenbrenner and Simpson/Kaminski. African American women may work in sectors such as service and caring where they are particularly vulnerable to abuses of interactional justice (a specific site of racism) and thus are more concerned about these issues. The fact that unions may offer the best form of protection against such abuses may help to explain the particular support of unions and unionization by African American women.

It is obviously impossible to give a full account of the almost twenty presentations that were crammed into little more than one full day. For more information, see the agenda and conference papers posted at the conference website\*. In the more than twenty years since I started to research and write about women and unions, to my knowledge, this has been the only academic conference devoted to the topic. I hope it will be the first of many.

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\*Posted at [www.ilr.cornell.edu/aliceCook100th](http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/aliceCook100th)

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> "Distributive justice refers to the perceived fairness of rewards allocation within an organization, such as their current pay and benefit levels. Procedural justice refers to the formal level of decision-making process associated with these and related outcomes, including the provision of some system of employee complaint or appeal regarding the consequences of first-stage decision making... Interactional justice ...has been called the 'social side of justice' and refers to the perceived fairness of the way employees are treated by others, particularly organizational decision-makers and authority figures." (p.6)